Semiotics and Pragmatics of Stage Improvisation
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Semiotics and Pragmatics of Stage Improvisation

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In an early chapter of his *Useless Memoirs* (1797) the aged playwright Count Carlo Gozzi interrupts his autobiographical narrative with a digression on improvisation. The discussion is occasioned by the author’s recollection that when he was a boy he liked to improvise on the guitar and to sing impromptu verses to his own accompaniment, a fact that now leads him to describe, and comment very negatively upon, the merits of improvisation in the art of poetry (Gozzi 1890, p. 202). As a playwright working in the tradition of the commedia dell’arte and in partnership with the great actor Antonio Sacchi, the last of a long line of distinguished improvisers in the professional theater, Gozzi had championed a unique form of the genre, offering Sacchi scenes that were little more than narrative suggestions and stage directions, while writing out in full the roles conceived for most other members of Sacchi’s company, in whose ability as improvisers he did not have as much confidence but who were nonetheless honored to work under his literary tutelage. As a young man, when he was an amateur actor, Gozzi too had impressed his audience with his capacity to improvise dramatic monologue and dialogue as a farcical female impersonator. But having cultivated elegant writing throughout all of his mature life, Gozzi could not bring himself to appreciate as a serious cultural undertaking the art of publicly improvising poetry, which had so fascinated him as a boy.

Though written long after the end of the Renaissance, in a period that saw the demise of improvised drama as a commercial enterprise, Gozzi’s digression is relevant in at least two ways to the present project. The first is of a historical nature. Gozzi’s commentary tells us that at the end of the eighteenth century, improvisation in the various arts could still be considered in the same purview, something that made it natural for someone to discuss improvisation in music, drama, and poetry without giving the impression that he was discussing things that had little more than a name in common.
Such a purview is no longer possible in our time and was already starting to lose much of its appeal in the age of Gozzi, when improvisation was systematically attacked on various fronts, for aesthetic as well as ideological reasons. Gozzi belongs to a transitional period in the history of improvisation, a stage in its development located almost exactly halfway between our time and the Renaissance. Since Gozzi’s time, the status of improvisation as a compositional form has undergone several changes, chief among which are its radical decline in popularity and artistic dignity, virtuosity being now measured with different meters, and the lapse of the conceptual unity that previously sustained it across the borders of various arts, which nineteenth- and twentieth-century history has pulled further apart, in response, no doubt, to the ever increasing urge toward the total compartmentalization of culture. In each one of these separate areas of activity, improvisation has become susceptible of independent development, at a pace and in a direction determined chiefly by the changing aesthetic relationship of performance to notation. In the twentieth-century theater, for example, improvisation has largely become a rehearsal strategy. It has gone, that is to say, as far as it possibly could from its prototype in the early commedia dell’arte tradition without ceasing, however, to be improvisation.

The second point of relevance in Gozzi’s narration is methodological, for his observations lead us to think of how natural it is for scholars to look at improvisation in the practice of a given art through critical categories that are essentially alien to its nature. Gozzi was very careful not to make this error in the theater, resisting for many years the temptation to publish his commedia dell’arte plays, which had been written to be staged and not to be read. When he finally published them, the magic was suddenly gone because they were now judged as scripted or literary plays. But he easily lapsed into error when he examined improvised poetry, which he summarily condemned as inferior art. In the absence of an adequate theory of lyrical improvisation, Gozzi naturally assimilated oral and written poetry, and used theoretical models of the latter to guide his reasoning in his appraisal of the former. This attitude, which has been greatly intensified since the age of Gozzi, is the result of a presumed hierarchy in artistic culture that places written words far above spoken words, written texts above their physical enactment, compositions above performances, concepts above designs, and designs above the objects that embody them. The modern world is a world of scripts and graphic metaphors, and the large body of theory that it has produced is in general rooted in writing, notation, and graphic symbols. A performance that is not the execution of a notated text, which precedes it in time and logic, but a self-sustaining creative act is always in danger of being radically altered by the theoretical categories through which it is examined if these categories were originally developed for the analysis of a scripted or notated work.
As a technical term “improvisation” originally denoted only the art of impromptu verse-making, at first in Italian but then in the other romance languages as well, especially Spanish. As late as 1636, “improvisare” was defined, in Lorenzo Franciosini’s Italian and Spanish dictionary, only as unpremeditated poetical composition, “comporre versi senza pensarvi,” and was rendered periphrastically as “hechar coplas de repente,” there not being yet an equivalent word in Spanish (Franciosini 1636, p. 320). In the course of the seventeenth century, the term was also used to describe the impromptu composition of dialogue on stage, and what we have been calling “commedia dell’arte” since 1750, when the expression was first used by Goldoni in his Teatro comico (act I, scene 2), was then called “commedia all’improvviso.” The term entered the English language in 1765 (earliest example in the Oxford English Dictionary) by way of “improvisatore” to describe a person with the talent of composing verses in extempore recitation. Since verses were at times improvised to a musical accompaniment, the term became especially relevant to musicology, and it is in that acceptance that it entered the English musical lexicon. The scholarly use of “improvisation” to describe the process of unpremeditated composition in the other arts, in which it was either not used or used derivatively or descriptively in a nontechnical way, is the result of a more recent analogical expansion of the original category. In the disciplines that study the verbal arts, for which the very idea of “oral literature” is, strictly speaking, a contradiction in terms, the practice of improvisation continued to be regarded for a long time as a form of artistic crudeness and therefore on the fringes of literary history. In contrast, the analogous practice in Western music, which mostly concerns the singing of discant, the ornamentation of melody, and thorough bass accompaniment, was for many centuries central to the art, which at times it entirely dominated.

These two lessons from Gozzi, the one in historiography and the other in method, are good indications of the type of work that we must do in order to understand correctly the phenomenon of improvisation in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The history of improvisation has not yet been written, but the ambitious scholar who is attracted by the prospect would do well to reflect on the usefulness of writing it regressively, starting with the present and proceeding rearward to the earliest instances of the phenomenon that are within his reach, always arguing from the effect to the cause rather than the other way round. An approach of this nature would enable us to see both the continuity and the discontinuity by which one stage in the development of improvisation as a form of cultural practice is related to the other. Our descriptive language is similar to that of earlier periods of history, but our artistic forms and cultural contexts are different, and so we risk being prevented from understanding earlier instances of the phenomenon by the words that apparently best equip us to grasp its essence. Regressive analysis
instead would automatically force us to unite theory and history, since its practice would require us to develop distinct theoretical models for each stage of development of the idea of improvisation, each new model representing a revision of the one that is closer to us in history, and simultaneously to explain the changes that we are compelled to make in response to the historical parameters that define each earlier period.

The professionalization of the performer

In a regressive history of improvisation, it makes sense to locate the initial perspective in the second half of the eighteenth century, for the period between the later Middle Ages and the Enlightenment can be fruitfully grasped in a single purview, representing as it does the first phase of development of capitalism and liberalism in Europe. This is a period in which a new social division of labor caused the middle class to advance to a position of dominance in intellectual and artistic life, and in which the professions that have come down to us, each with its degree of cultural dignity and commercial value, were founded and were allowed to grow, adhering to the logic of their own technical evolution while responding to trends in the middle-class markets of Europe and to the preferences of aristocratic patrons. In the sphere of the arts, these changes are traceable through the emergence and history of the entertainment industry, the chief distinctive features of which were the discovery of the commercial value of artistic entertainment and the professionalization of the performers. In the age of feudalism, a performer was either a marketplace showman, intent on pleasing the audience to whose generosity he would appeal for compensation by passing his hat around at the end of his act, or a court performer charged with satisfying his lord’s need for diversion. In the early centuries of European capitalism, these two kinds of performers coexisted alongside a third category of musicians, dancers, and actors who catered mostly to the social strata between the court and street audiences, skilled performers who offered their labor on a par with other productive activities in the new market economy and who strove to rise to a position of dominance in the developing entertainment industry. Their history in this age—mostly the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries—is largely the history of their professionalization and rise to stardom. The chief force behind this rise, which saw the transformation of medieval minstrels, tumblers, and mimes into the celebrated virtuosos of music, dance, and drama, was virtuosic improvisation. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the performance practice whose development had been propelled by improvisation began to change, and at that time the performer, though he may have been a star of the first magnitude, began to lose the right to contribute to the creation of the text during the performance itself.
When we move backward from the present to the late eighteenth century, and from that time to the early Renaissance, we find our purview becoming, very rapidly, more densely populated with distinguished improvisers, and we discover that our concept of improvisation becomes progressively more inclusive and that its parts become more closely integrated. If in our mental image of Gozzi, twanging his guitar and singing impromptu lyrics for sport, we replace his eighteenth-century clothes with a late medieval or early Renaissance costume, and if we furthermore trade in his guitar for a lira da braccio, the Renaissance instrument of improvisation, we have the famous icon of Orpheus taming wild beasts with his song—the picture by means of which Renaissance iconography represented the self-understanding of humanism, understood to be centered on the civilizing function of art as performance. And if we should then want to divest this image of the abstract quality that comes to it from contemporary woodcuts, in which the figure of Orpheus is not meant to resemble anybody in particular, we could easily visualize it with the countenance, real or imaginary, of a number of real performers who in the early Renaissance achieved considerable distinction in the art of singing ad lyram, that is, of improvising on the lira da braccio. Our first choice would probably be Leonardo da Vinci, who, according to Vasari, was a great master of the art of impromptu verse-making and who extemporized magnificently on the lira. Our second choice might be the celebrated improviser Baccio Ugolini, who performed the title role in Poliziano’s pastoral drama La favola di Orfeo in 1471, or Atalante Migliorotti, who, having learned to improvise from Leonardo himself, performed it in the second production, remounted for the pleasure of the Duke of Mantua in 1491 (Vasari 1906, pp. 18 and 28). But other historical figures would no doubt suggest themselves to our minds, commensurately to the frequency with which the image of Orpheus finds its way into our field of view from the contemporary iconographic tradition.

Nor is it likely that a performance on the lira would present itself to us in isolation, as the sole attraction, for the Renaissance delighted in multidimensional shows involving all the performing arts. Music, dance, and drama came easily together as components of the same production. Among the many examples possible, none is perhaps more illustrative than the banquet offered on May 20, 1529, in the ducal garden of Belfiore by Ippolito II d’Este, future cardinal of Ferrara then still archbishop of Milan. This was a seventeen-course supper in which each course was accompanied by a different type of entertainment. The event began with the performance of a farce, at the end of which, while the guests washed their hands with perfumed water and sampled hors-de-ouvres prior to the first course, four dancers performed “balli alla gagliarda,” a dance susceptible of considerable variation. During the fifth course, “buffoni alla bergamasca,” that is to say, the archetypal clowns from which the stock characters of commedia dell’arte
were later fashioned, improvised antics around the tables. During the twelfth course, five performers sang "canzoni alla pavana in villanesco," while during the fourteenth course a group of dancers imitated peasants scything grass to the sound of a moresca. At the beginning of the fifteenth course, a young man emerged from the pergola singing ad lyram, in the likeness of an Orpheus reborn to new life in a refined Renaissance garden (Luisi 1977, p. 65f).

Insofar as improvisation remained in the realm of mechanical skills to be used with measure in the service of art and the social order, the growing popularity of improvising performers was not an especially troublesome phenomenon. There had always been, after all, a tradition that encouraged the public exhibition of skill. However, the professionalization of the performer and his claim to stardom came together with the claim that, in the first place, performance was not an instrument for the execution of previously conceived art but itself art of the highest caliber, equal and possibly superior to the art of composition, and, in the second place, that improvisers were performers in possession of a vocabulary and of a grammar of direct composition that enabled them to generate coherent text in the act of performance itself, and therefore outside the range of control by other interested parties, such as composers, playwrights, and, as we shall see, the authorities. This, of course, had always been present in latent form, but what was potential in feudal society was quickly becoming actual in early modern capitalism, and that provoked some opposition.

On the theoretical front, the source of the most formidable antagonism was the Aristotelian tradition following the Renaissance discovery of the Poetics, and hence the large body of literary and dramatic theory that developed under its influence. This theoretical obstacle concerns drama specifically rather than all the arts in general, although the degree to which Aristotelianism penetrated the whole of Western culture, especially in the later continental Renaissance, makes the issues contextually significant to all of them. Moreover, the Poetics has clear theoretical importance for all the imitative arts—and we need not agree with the details of Butcher's celebrated and influential interpretation of the treatise as a "theory of poetry and fine art" in order to establish the connection. Read in the context of Aristotle's other works and under the general categories described in the opening chapter, the Poetics has much to say that is philosophically relevant to all the arts without thereby implying that they are not essentially distinct from each other. Aristotle is not concerned with the formulation of a general aesthetic but with the theoretical and practical issues involved in the process of art making, and therefore with problems determined not by universal principles but by the nature of the intended artificial product. The question of improvisation is one of those that, though addressed by Aristotle specifically to the art of making drama, have a wider sphere of theoretical validity quite
simply because the arts of making dances and music have a number of analogous problems to solve, and, in any case, frequently find themselves working in intimate collaboration with the art of drama, as they did in the plays that Aristotle himself saw in Athens and to which his reflections on tragedy were firmly anchored.

Aristotle describes improvisation as an early phase of the productive activity that led to the development of drama as an art form while remaining itself pre-artistic. “Rude improvisations gave birth to poetry” (Poetics 1448b23, Butcher). Art was governed by precise theoretical principles and rules of structure, and was guaranteed longevity by notation; improvisation was devised to produce unforeseen and unforeseeable text, which is the etymological meaning of the Latin term (im-provisus), and was limited moreover to the brief life of single performances. For Aristotle, improvisation had been historically necessary for the evolution of art but was not itself art. Much Renaissance theory tacitly presupposed or explicitly restated this idea without question. “Little by little, from improvisations, there arose what is called Old Comedy,” wrote Robortellus, certain of the fact that what came before Old Comedy was not quite art (Robortellus 1964, p. 229). One way to reconcile Aristotle’s view of improvisation with the rising professional and cultural status of the performer was to obfuscate the concept in a reading of the Poetics sympathetic to both sides of the issue. In the early sixteenth century, when the language of access to the Poetics was still largely Latin, Lodovico Ricchieri gave the phrase “ex rudi principio” as equivalent to Aristotle’s statement on the improvisational stage of poetry, while later in the same century, when the Poetics was also being studied in Italian, the anonymous translator whose manuscript of Aristotle’s work is preserved in the National Library of Florence, explicitly rejects the Italian phrase “allo improviso” in favor of “co’ versi rozzi,” thus speaking of primitive attempts at art without specifying that the cause of their crudity was improvisation, and showing at the same time that, in this tradition, the very idea of drama is in the domain of the writer rather than the performer (Weinberg 1974, I, pp. 368 and 589). The playwright, a term in which the practical maker (-wright) of drama is explicitly mentioned, has become for the Renaissance the play-writer.

Outside the circle of Aristotelian classicism, at whose center we might place playwrights, composers, and choreographers, whether or not they are aware of working under the influence of the Poetics, the domain of theory included much that did not run counter to improvisation and much that favored its rise to prominence. The tradition of medieval rhetoric, as it was handed down through the schools, was especially supportive. A great legacy of the second sophistic, with its celebrated emphasis on virtuosity, improvisation was for medieval rhetoric a skill to be mastered after long hours of practice. A good description of what was understood by the concept of improvisation
is “fluency of rehandling” (Baldwin 1928, p. 15), that is to say, the ability to
treat the same point extempore from a variety of perspectives, making quick
and clever use of arguments and turns of phrase that are potentially applicable
to many situations. Since training in rhetoric was basic to all education, the
mental apparatus for improvisation, though acquired linguistically, could be
easily carried over into the arena of the nonverbal arts. It is safe to generalize
that, in the verbal as well as in the nonverbal arts, the apparatus consisted of
two fundamental skills: the ability to generate by means of stock phrases and
variations a rich and vibrant segment of text within a given theme or structure,
and the ability to deliver it effectively to the audience. The first of these entails
knowing how to determine in its particulars the not-given substance of the
performance text, a facility that can be acquired principally by means of training
in the rhetoric of copia, which, according to Erasmus, whose classicism is
deeply rooted in the medieval Christian tradition, contributes greatly to the
development of “skill in extemporaneous speaking or writing” (Erasmus
1963, p. 17).

The second skill consists in the ability to articulate every segment of the
performance using the rhetoric of body language most appropriate to it and
simultaneously most accessible to the audience. Throughout the Middle
Ages, when the level of literacy was low, reliance on gesture was high in all
spheres of life, and, as a consequence, theoretical reflection on the nature
of gestures was a more frequent occurrence than in other periods of history.
As society became increasingly diversified with the decline of feudalism,
“the pedagogy of gestures became a necessity,” each social group seeking
automatically to identify itself by means of a visible body language and code
of behavior (Schmitt 1992, p. 67). These teachings on gesture have significant
implications for our appreciation of the role of unrehearsed performance
in all communicative transactions. Roger Bacon, for example, stressed the
importance of physical performance in all forms of serious oratory and pointed
out the need for the speaker to determine an appropriate performance style
when he first faces his listeners. The speaker, he says, should take stock
of his audience, determine quickly their sensitivities and mental disposition
to what he has to say, and then choose on the spot from the repertoire in
his control the gestures and postures necessary to captivate them, for the
audience “should be moved more by the movements of the mind expressed
by the body than by the teaching or language” (Bacon 1963, p. 384). The same
argument, or, for that matter, the same narrative, is differently colored when
it is presented to different groups, since the body language is automatically
adjusted in the direction of the gestural code familiar to the group.

There is no great risk of error in assuming that this situation obtains in
all the performance arts of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, not only
because in the contemporary consciousness they were all theoretically, if
circuitously, retraceable to the rhetorical matrix, but also because, like oratory, they all included delivery to an audience as the final creative moment. The analogy between rhetoric and music was commonplace and explored on various fronts. With respect to the rhetoric of gestural expression, which is of special interest to us, it is sufficient to recall that Giustiniani could lavish great praise on singers performing at the courts of Mantua and Ferrara in 1575, not only for the exquisite way in which they enriched the compositions with sophisticated ornamentation, but also for having “accompanied the music and the sentiment with appropriate facial expressions, glances and gestures, with no awkward movements of the mouth or hands or body which might not express the feeling of the song” (Giustiniani 1972, p. 70). As for dance, we may recall that Arbeau described it as a “mute rhetoric,” in which movement and gesture can be used not only to elicit an emotional response from the spectator but also to convey to him ideas of discursive complexity (Arbeau 1967, p. 16). At a higher level of generality, therefore, Roger Bacon’s statement says, in the first place, that the performance language in which an artistic act is expressed is determined by the performer in response to the perceived performance culture of the audience, and, in the second place, that the gestural language of performance is not a mechanically added physical layer, preconceived in the mind of the performer and separable in the perception of the spectator, but the material dimension of the very soul of the text, from which it could not be separated without dissolving away its uniqueness.

In the art of dance, of course, physicality was the only perceivable dimension, everything else belonging to the realm of the intellectual or emotional connotations of the body in motion. It might seem therefore that, once this dimension is determined by artistic preconception, improvisation has little more than a decorative role to play. But that is far from being true, since it is chiefly through improvisations in the act of performance that preconceived structural elements are transformed into a signifying text. A clear illustration of this idea is found in the little-known French legend of Our Lady’s Tumbler from the beginning of the fourteenth century. Tired of the worldly context of his art, a penitent tumbler sought refuge among the monks of Clairvaux, but, untutored as he was, he could neither read the hours of Our Lady, to whom he was profoundly devoted, nor chant to her as the other brothers did, and so he decided to honor her secretly with his body. He started with high and low leaps and with a reverence, which was probably begun even then on the left foot, because, as Caroso would observe two centuries later, “one shows reverence to someone close to one’s heart” (Caroso 1975, p. 11), and there can be no doubt that the tumbler’s act was a gesture of great love, conceived as a spiritual parallel of the profane one in the contemporary courtly love tradition. Having reverenced to the Virgin, the tumbler then proceeded by doing first the
somersault of Metz, and then “the French vault, then the vault of Chapagne, then the Spanish vault, then the vaults they love in Brittany, then the vault of Lorraine... Afterwards he did the Roman vault, and then, with hands before his brow, danced daintily,” concluding his performance by walking on his hands, twirling his feet, and weeping with his eyes, until he swooned with exhaustion. The reverence and all of these vaults and leaps, preconceived structures of movement from the dance repertoire of the tumbler’s secular life, had no previous relation to Marian devotion, but they were arranged in a pattern and performed with such ornaments and variations that they became a silent orchestric chant of praise, parallel to the vocal one that the tumbler could hear rising from the choir even as he danced alone in the crypt and which served him as a distant accompaniment. The Abbot and a fellow monk who were spying on his secret performance were deeply impressed by how “he varied so cunningly” his vaults—that is, by his skill in improvising around them—but not more so than the Virgin, who was so moved that she came out of her statue on the altar and gently stepped down to succor her devoted tumbler, who had used all the signifying power of his art to sing silently his love to her (Our Lady’s Tumbler in Groag Bell 1973, pp. 135 and 137).

These examples lead us to consider that improvisation may be understood in at least two senses. In the first sense it refers to the creation of a complete and previously unscripted performance text, using only the vocabulary of the repertoire and the logic of the genre, while in the second sense it refers to the addition of supplementary material to a scripted but incomplete text, using, again, the vocabulary and logic of the genre but adhering throughout to the structure of the work given. In the first sense it applies principally to the art of impromptu verbal performance, which includes extemporizing rhymes, telling stories, and delivering sermons and orations, but it also covers the improvisation of folk dances. To be sure, it may also apply to music and to other forms of dance, but in an extremely limited way, and probably only to describe a pre-composition exercise meant to lead to a score or a choreography. On the other hand, it does not apply at all to drama. The second sense of improvisation applies principally to drama, music, and choreographed dance, but generally not to folk dance and to verse-making or other forms of impromptu literary composition.

**Productive and reproductive imagination**

The textuality of performance can be conceived as if written on three separate lines. On the first line, we find the dance steps in sequence, the musical melody, and the dramatic plot, all specific versions of the artistic action in the Aristotelian sense of the word, perceivable as a structured unit with beginning,
middle, and end: this is what the dance, the music, and the play are about. On the second line, we find the accidental dance steps and variations, the musical ornamentation (if not a discant or thorough bass), and the verbal substance of a play: this is the dimension of the action that is found in the articulation of the text using the specific medium of the art in question, if the text had been fully written as a choreography, a complete score, or a dramatic script. On the third line we may imagine the physical and vocal gestures involved in the delivery of all three arts: this is the gestural dimension of the action that would be contained in the stage directions, if every segment of the performance text had a detailed stage direction to prescribe it.

In commedia dell’arte, the material on the first line is called the scenario, and it is given in its entirety by an author to the company prior to production, whereas the material for the second line, which includes the dialogue and speeches, and for the third line, which includes the physical articulation of speech and action, are improvised by the performers acting within the constraints imposed by the scenario on the first line. In playwright-dominated traditions, the materials on the first and second lines are normally given in their entirety by the author to the company, but the substance of the third line is left largely to the performers, who must produce it in their physical interpretation of the materials on the other two lines. In early vocal music, the composer provides in the score only the material in the first line, the essential melodic structure, whereas the notes for the second, including discant and ornamentation by diminutions and passagework, and third lines, including the gestural expression of emotion and spiritual disposition as well as of the uniqueness of the performance experience, are left for the singer to contribute in his or her interpretation of the music given on the first line. In early baroque music, the thorough bass is improvised on the second line, whereas the singer’s coloratura in virtuosic aria repetitions would be found on both the second and third lines of performance textuality. Similarly, in dance, the choreography does not extend beyond the first line, and there it is at times no more than a list of step sequences, transition markers, and starting positions, whereas the ornamentation and the expected pattern and rhythm modifications—which at once embellish the choreographed movements and turn them into specific signifying structures—and the gestural articulation that accompanies the total flow of the body in motion are improvised respectively on the second and third lines.

In producing the material for the second line, the performer was expected to be both faithful to what he had received and creative in his own contribution. Just how this was done is too complex to explore in detail here, involving as it does technical issues in the theory of artistic form, in contemporary training programs, and in audience expectation, for each of the arts under consideration, not all of which are within the scope of this book.
For our purposes, it is sufficient to generalize what Herman Finck observed with respect to the performance of vocal music: “you receive all sounds from your mind and intelligence” (Fink 1979, p. 62). In the mind the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance distinguished the operation of two kinds of imagination: a reproductive imagination, by which previously memorized materials are retrieved to presence, and a productive imagination by which new ones, distinct from those already given, are brought to consciousness. The reproductive imagination is a near synonym of memory, but it is active rather than passive, and it includes a sense of purposeful agency, which memory does not. Performance by means of improvisation involves both forms of imagination, in a ratio that varies continuously along the temporal axis of the text. In the medieval rhetorical tradition the special distinction of an improviser is his “readiness to draw upon a store” (Baldwin 1928, p. 16), where the readiness may be interpreted as his productive imagination, which knows what new objects, beyond those already given in the text, must be brought materially into textual existence, and the act of retrieval as his reproductive faculty, which provides him with a choice of objects from the repository deep in his memory. For this reason, instruction programs in all the performing arts emphasize the conscious retention and accumulation of minimal segments of text for later use in appropriate performance contexts. Jerome of Moravia would prescribe precisely this to a singer in training: “when he will have heard a pleasing note, let him diligently retain it, that he might make use of it” (Jerome 1979, p. 7). The principle is the same in drama, as we can see from a very similar comment by the distinguished actor Niccolò Barbieri, who observed that performers “study and fortify their memory with a wide variety of things such as sayings, phrases, love-speeches, reprimands, cries of despair, and ravings, in order to have them ready for the proper occasion” (Barbieri 1970, p. 53).

In this connection, it is useful to consider in detail a statement, from a later period but fully in alignment with the tradition just described, on the difference between impromptu and script-based performance by the seventeenth-century commedia dell’arte actor Evaristo Gherardi, who had dazzled Parisian audiences as Arlecchino at the Comédie Italienne for many years. In the introduction to his collection of scripts in French he makes the following observation:

One must not expect to find in this collection finished comedies, because Italian pieces cannot be printed in their entirety. The reason for this is that the Italian comedians learn nothing by heart, and because, in playing comedy, it is enough for them to have seen the subject of it only a moment before going on the stage.... Anyone can learn a part by heart and recite on the stage all that he has learned; but to become an Italian comedian something
quite different is necessary. For to speak of a “good Italian comedian” means a man with a foundation, who acts more from imagination than from memory; who, in acting, composes everything that he speaks; who stimulates the players he finds opposite him on the stage; that is to say, who so successfully marries words and action with those of his comrades that he enters immediately into the play and into all the movements that the other demands of him, in a manner to make everyone believe that it has all been prearranged. (Gherardi 1970, p. 58)

An impromptu performer “acts more from imagination than from memory”—or, in the terminology that we have already introduced, more from the productive than from the reproductive imagination—because he memorizes the story outline and the configuration of the scenes, but he composes the actual text during the performance itself by tapping into his own creative power. But though he makes up the material being of the text on stage, drawing it out at an amazing speed from some mysterious place in his imagination just as it begins to take shape in it, he is not exclusively an improviser, since he must adhere very closely to the guidelines of the scenario in order to avoid chaos. All performances involve the productive and the reproductive imagination as combined sources, but what distinguishes the extempore acting of commedia dell’arte players is that the ratio by which the two faculties are united is by far in favor of the productive imagination, whereas in script-based acting, the weight is on the side of the reproductive faculty. The logic of impromptu acting is grounded in the reproductive imagination insofar as the narrative structure of the performance and the actor’s repertory of phrases and gestures are concerned, but it is grounded only in the productive imagination in what pertains to the textuality needed to sustain that structure. One cannot be a successful impromptu performer without a fertile imagination, alert to all subtle turns of the action, and quick in bringing forth the most appropriate text for the situation.

Like all other skills, impromptu performance requires years of training, the right disposition by itself being, as a mathematician would say, a necessary but not a sufficient condition. It has always been assumed, and the assumption is entirely reasonable, that, as far as drama is concerned, the training took place within the troupes themselves, where children learned the art of improvising from older members of the company. But it is a fact, albeit still totally unexplored, that there were training programs in Naples, Bologna, and Palermo “and many other cities of Italy,” as we read in Andrea Perrucci’s treatise on acting (Perrucci 2008, p. 102). Well-trained impromptu actors make their work appear effortless, so much so that observers unaware of the discipline and training required convince themselves that stage improvisation is not a very sophisticated art, and so they allow themselves to speak of it
with contempt. Prominent in this group of critical observers are, according to Perrucci, “poets, scholars, and literary men,” all paladins of the written word and hence of memory-based performance, men blinded by their own art to that involved in unrehearsed impromptu composition, until they are put to the test themselves and are allowed the opportunity to fail miserably.

In the above quotation Gherardi makes plain one of the most difficult aspects of all acting from imagination, and that is acting with a partner. Each actor must marry his utterances and gestures with those of his partner in such a way that the resulting combination contributes naturally to the development of the action outlined in the scenario. The equivalent situation in dance occurs when the lady performs graceful passeggi around her partner’s virtuoso display of a fundamental variation. As for music, this is one of the areas in which there is considerable difference, given that in early modern music improvisation generally concerns solo performance, whereas in drama soliloquies are much less numerous than dialogue. The medieval giullare performed always alone, playing all the roles himself and making use of improvisation from the first to the last scenes of the performance. But as the giullari were replaced by companies and narrative performances by dialogical ones, the issue of acting from the imagination became much more complex. The process involves, as we shall see, the formation of binary units of vocal and gestural speech, each in the form of a stimulus-response combination, by performers constantly assessing the range of appropriate expressions available to each other and simultaneously interpreting the audience’s reaction in terms of the development most likely to be expected at that point in the exchange. With a minimum of terminological adaptation, this model can also represent communicative transactions in the other arts, such as that between two performers in competition or in a duet. In all cases, dialogical improvisation is the result of intimate collaboration and presupposes that each performer has, on the one hand, complete knowledge of the range of his partner’s skill and, on the other hand, an intuitive sense of whether with each response it is desirable or not to fulfill the audience’s expectation.

**Disciplined creativity**

It follows from these considerations that the conception of improvisation that obtained in early modern Europe is quite removed from the various techniques that the term designates in our times. The chief differences can be usefully summarized by negative determination, that is, by indicating what early modern improvisation was not. It is clear that dramatic improvisation was not then a rehearsal exercise in character discovery, which is what the term principally designates for much twentieth-century theater practice. Nor
was it a compositional exercise aimed at the full development of a script through an impromptu exploration of a given situation or theme, which is what the term represents for many script-development programs in our times. Equally clear is that, in this early period of its history, stage improvisation is never a spontaneous form of creation *ex nihilo*, mysteriously progressing toward aesthetic fullness without the aid of predetermined constraints, as has been occasionally fantasized on the basis of various pseudo-romantic notions of primitive creativity. On the contrary, improvisation in this period would be inconceivable without rigid constraints. In the oral composition of lyric poetry, for example, control over the material to be expressed extempore is ensured by the semantic field of the theme selected, which represents for the impromptu poet the limits of his available vocabulary, while control over the aesthetic shape of the product is exercised by means of the metrical patterns and rhyme schemes, to which the improviser consents to adhere before he begins his performance. In longer poems, the story and the characters must also be factored in with the theme as part of the initial conditions. Analogous statements can be made with respect to drama, in which the scenario, the conventional functional value of the stock characters in the plot—plot-building in the case of Brighella, rhythm maintenance in the case of Arlecchino, and so on—the logic for the distribution of key virtuoso numbers, known as *lazzi* in the commedia dell’arte tradition, and preestablished scene divisions define the region in which the performers may legitimately move on their own without running the risk of becoming grossly unintelligible.

In the theory of dance, performance can be regarded as a combination of steps memorized from a choreographer’s plan and steps dictated to the dancer solely by his productive imagination, working in unison with his reproductive faculty, and interwoven by him in extempore fashion with the steps in the choreography. As in drama and poetry, improvised dance steps had to occur within a precise framework of rules. In both popular and art dances, improvisation took chiefly the form of imaginative embellishment and variation within the horizon of expectations that surrounded each dance, as determined by the style, music, and tradition. Unlike the history of music, the history of early modern dance generated very few treatments of the subject, and these are not very detailed studies by any means. But the factors that in the performance practice of the time were meant to condition the improvisatory impulse of the dancers are equally clear. For example, some movements are gender-specific and cannot be performed indifferently by male and female dancers. The basic pattern and the choreographed sequence of steps may be modified, but not to an extent that would change the perceivable identity of the dance. Variation dances, such as the gagliarda, can be performed in a number of ways, but the timing must be tightly controlled. Passeggi can be inserted only at certain points and normally signal that the partner is engaged
in a virtuosic display of variation. The operational principle involved is the same as the one that obtained in music and drama—the fluency of improvisation is never a matter of free and spontaneous exuberance but always a matter of disciplined movement within the limits demarcating the range of creative legitimacy available to the performer.

In drama, this range becomes even more restricted in the performance of plays that are partly scripted and partly left for the performers to improvise on stage, and becomes relatively narrow in the case of plays for which the script exists in full. That improvisation is necessary in the first of these cases is obvious and requires no further comment—the scenes to be improvised in dialogical form are sustained by the same model of binary combinations into elementary segments of text. In music, partly scripted plays correspond to incomplete scores—missing discant, ornamentation, basso continuo, or coloratura, as the case may be—that are as common as incomplete dramatic dialogues are rare. Moreover, incomplete scripts come relatively late in the commedia dell’arte tradition—in the age of Gozzi, in fact, when the end of dramatic improvisation as a professional practice was clearly visible on the horizon, whereas the tradition of the virtuosic ornamentation of melody, which is the form of musical improvisation most closely related to this type of dramatic texture, is long, well documented, and, to a considerable extent, taken for granted by composers, many of whom “intentionally wrote in an austere manner, relying on the singers’ ability to improvise the necessary ornamental figurations” (Neuman 1993, p. 517). But that a degree of improvisation is also inevitable in fully scripted plays may not be obvious to everyone. With reference to Gherardi’s approach, we can say that in the execution of scripted plays and full scores, the art of performance is grounded chiefly, but not exclusively, in the performer’s memory of the script or of the notes. The productive imagination contributes to the degree that the text requires interpretation or invites enrichment. The actor must then assume the responsibility of making explicit what is only implied by the text, and to do so he must improvise, physically if not verbally, while the musician must respond to the score’s expectation that at the right places he will supply the proper embellishments in the appropriate style. In such a performance context, actors and musicians who do not make use of their imagination as a source of performance textuality are ultimately mediocre performers who add nothing to the luster of the artistic team and generally bring down the level of production. Gherardi had stern words to say about them: “I compare a comedian of this sort to a paralytic arm, which, though useless, is still called an arm” (Gherardi 1970, p. 58). All good performance has improvisational elements in it, from the few needed to make clear the meaning of a play text or score to the more numerous ones required to complete a partly scripted work to the continuous ones found in the impromptu performance of works that did not have a prior
existence in any form. And as we move from a scripted work to a nonscripted one, we note that the pivotal point of the reproductive-productive imagination continuum shifts from a position that favors one extremity to a position that favors the other.

In all acts of improvisation, the performer’s awareness of the structural parameters in which he must contain himself must be coupled with an equally clear awareness of the degree to which the audience is familiar with the verbal, visual, and musical vocabulary with which he is about to fashion his product, pushing his art somewhat beyond the limits expected by the audience and yet remaining sufficiently within them to preclude any sense of obscurity. When this is done with the required skill, the final product observed by the audience is seamless and totally free of signs that may indicate uncertainty of development. In fact, the audience should not be able to distinguish an improvised performance from one based on a fully scripted score, choreography or play text. What, then, is the difference between an improvised and a nonimprovised performance? From the perspective of the phenomenology of perception, the only answer possible is that there is no difference at all: the performers enable the audience to experience their living art in exactly the same manner as they would experience a performance based on a previously scripted work. From the perspective of the performers’ perception of themselves in action, the answer is that in improvisation they have authorial status, whereas in nonimprovised performances they are instruments of another person’s artistic intent, bending their creativity in order to serve a predetermined artistic vision. In so far as the performers are the authors of the performance, the show is linked to them in an essential way, and they cannot be replaced without prejudice to the performance text.

The problem, however, is that in addition to performers and audiences, there are frequently also readers in the picture, and readers are not concerned with the perception of a living art form but with the written documents that describe in detail the intended performance, generally viewed by them as a more or less successful realization of the author’s intention. Readers, in other words, are primarily interested in scores, details of choreography, and complete scripts, and only secondarily in performances. For readers, a play text is the fixed artistic matrix that can engender many performances. On the other hand, performances are ephemeral and difficult to study even with the aid of the text, but altogether impossible if the matrix itself is created during the performance and vanishes with it in the final applause. The readers who have been most preoccupied with the transitory nature of the type of performance texts of interest to us fall into two categories: members of the board of censors or officials otherwise concerned with ways of controlling the transmission of ideas to audiences, and historians from later periods
of history concerned with extrapolating from written and graphic sources a narrative of the status and development of the performing arts during a given time. As I have already suggested, historians may be able to overcome, in part at least, the obstacle of unrecorded performance texts if they write their histories regressively and from the inside, in a process designed to force them, little by little, to rid themselves of anachronistic and alien thought forms. But unless they are writing in a period that is reasonably close to the period of performance, various essential aspects of impromptu performance texts are likely to escape them in their entirety, while a number of other aspects would at best be available to them only through the filter of conjecture.

Censors are a different matter altogether, since for them improvisation is no more than a strategy for the avoidance of ideological screening. This is especially evident in the case of commedia dell’arte. Soon after the appearance of the first companies in the early decades of the Counter-Reformation, religious authorities denounced commedia because its texts, being only performance texts, could not be screened for orthodoxy and propriety prior to the production itself. In an official report to the Roman Curia dated 1578, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti went as far as to call for the complete suppression of commedia, since in the art of improvisation, its practitioners had found a way of circumventing authority with impunity (Taviani and Scino 1982, p. 319). Prior to the performance the censors had nothing to rehearse their authority on, in order to determine whether the performance was intended to be an innocent display of art or a devious stratagem for the dissemination of dangerous ideas. After the performance, it was already too late, and in any case there was no recorded evidence of wrongdoing that could be adduced in a police investigation. That is how, in such a profoundly repressive age as the Counter-Reformation, commedia dell’arte managed to thrive on themes of irreverence, satire, and subversion. Improvisation was an artistic technique designed to safeguard the freedom of the theater to comment on the values and institutions of society in a manner that occasionally ran counter to the sources of authority that sustained the status quo. Playwrights were generally dependent upon some form of patronage and belonged to a higher class than that of the street audiences sought out by early commedia troupes. As a consequence, the ideological perspective from which play text were composed, for carnival celebrations and for the periodic gatherings of academic organizations, was in perfect alignment with official policy. Discrepancies were unlikely and in any case would not get through the screening process of the inquisition. A playwright-dominated theater, in which the script must be licensed before production, is as easy to control as its performer-dominated counterpart is difficult.

Among the things that distinguish popular from literary drama is its proclivity to address the audience’s of their social location and to remind
them of the fact that it is within their power to reject ideas and values designed to further weaken their position in the hierarchy of authority. As a consequence, commedia players, who, having received admittance to court theaters and wanting to assure themselves the comforts and security of patronage, would surely present the same play differently in an aristocratic setting. Improvisation allowed them that flexibility, enabling them as it did to give the same repertory items a different political turn, transforming denouncement into legitimation. The history of the commedia dell’arte shows that what in the market places of its early history was subversive actually became reactionary and repressive by the age of Gozzi, largely under his influence. Improvisation is a slippery compositional tool, since it can endow any dramatic form with an enormous potential to adapt to different social settings and political circumstances.

This capacity for adaptation is a good point of access to the economic significance of extempore performance in all the arts. However, on this score, it is to the history of drama that we must turn for the clearest evidence, since in drama the economic circumstances of the first professional players are very well documented. In the staging of scripted plays, the conventional hierarchy of creative forces puts the author invariably above the performers, on the principle that the unperformed text has chronological, logical, and aesthetic priority over its performance. But this principle of subordination also has serious economic implications, especially in the Renaissance, the period in which performers first achieved professional status and incorporated themselves into a guild or arte, which is what the term alludes to in the expression commedia dell’arte. Now, according to contemporary sources, the production process of a literary play from conception to staging was extremely long, including as it did several months for the composition of the script and several others for its rehearsal. This did not constitute a problem in the amateur environments of court and academic drama, but it would have been disastrous in the newly formed professional setting, in which the livelihood of players and production crew depended entirely on the market value of their work. A product that takes so long to prepare has for the company that produces it a higher budget value than actual earning potential. On the other hand, a stage product created impromptu without the services of a playwright, a work requiring, moreover, less than an hour of total preparation time for each full performance (Perrucci 2008, p. 101), and, what is more, a work susceptible of sufficient variation to justify long runs and repetitions in other venues, has a much greater market value than a playwright-centered production could ever have in early modern Europe. Improvisation, cultivated to the point at which companies can venture confidently into the entertainment industry without the aid of a dramatist, is a tool for the economic emancipation of the common player from the subordinating tutelage of literature and simultaneously a condition for the
professionalization of the performer in the difficult market economy of early European capitalism (Molinari 1985, p. 40).

While functioning as a source of performance textuality, the imagination enabled skilled performers to vindicate their ideological, economic, and artistic autonomy in a world otherwise intent on keeping them anchored to a role of subservient dependence. The discovery that the power to improvise was a commercial commodity as well as an artistic faculty emboldened them with visions of cultural and social dignity previously unavailable to them. By cultivating their skills methodically and by marketing them shrewdly, they embarked on a journey that would soon transform them from the instruments of the art of others into the great virtuosos of their own.
In one of the earliest plays of the commedia dell’arte repertoire, Flaminio Scala’s *Flavio’s Fortune*, there is a scene in which Arlecchino, acting as the head showman of a motley troupe of mountebanks, instructs his assistants to set up a trestle stage and to place upon it a chair and a travelling bag. As soon as his orders are carried out, he and his companions jump onto the stage, take out their wares from the bag, and begin loudly to advertise them with speech, gestures, and music. Attracted by the show, a woman appears at a second-story window and leans out to watch them, while slowly an audience of potential buyers and curious passersby gather around. When a knockabout dispute arises, the players hilariously bring the stage tumbling down (Scala 1989, pp. 14–15). Published by a man who, in his youth, had himself been an accomplished actor and who, in this very play, had played the role of the young lover Flavio, this scene represents a precious self-reflexive moment in the repertoire, in which commedia dell’arte can be seen musing with farcical narcissism over its own origins as a commercial enterprise, as it represents its first struggle for existence to audiences and readers unlikely to have witnessed it directly in the piazzas and market places of Italian towns.

**Early development**

For the modern theater historian, the scene is a good point of access to the economic circumstances in which commedia dell’arte first made its appearance and to the material conditions that defined its earliest performances. The setting in which commedia dell’arte was born was the urban market place of the high Renaissance, where the economy of early Italian capitalism first began dramatically to influence the daily lives of ordinary members of society.
There gathered unscrupulous charlatans and genuine vendors, in larger numbers than had ever been possible under feudalism, to pitch their wares to a public that had grown quickly susceptible to the power of advertising, which with a jingle, a dance, and a skit seemed to make everyone all too eager to embark on the historical road to consumerism (cf. Tessari 1984, p. 113f). The forefathers of commedia dell’arte performers were charlatans and actor mountebanks struggling for a living in an economy that promised great rewards for initiative and inventiveness but that in reality forced many to carve out a meager living for themselves on the margin of the law. The piazzas and market places of Italy were the venues where the legendary skills of commedia dell’arte players were first developed and where the real possibility of a commercially based entertainment industry must have first been conceived.

Whether this possibility was actually first imagined by uneducated charlatans all too practiced in the art of mesmerizing others, by penniless mountebank actors who joined them on the trestle stage for a pittance, or by members of the audience with a keen eye for opportunity, or, indeed, by all in collaboration, is a moot point, but an important consideration nonetheless. What is beyond question, however, is the fact that the earliest commedia dell’arte players whose names have come down to us performed literary drama as well as commedia dell’arte farces, were well read in the dramatic and rhetorical traditions of Renaissance Italy and classical Rome, and wrote poetry and plays as well as important books of theory and erudition. The entrepreneurial spirit of Renaissance capitalism had given rise to a number of new trades designed to meet the demand for new products by utilizing a set of skills derived from several other occupations. Among the new trades was that of the professional actor.

The first Italian players who came together to form a legally constituted professional company, that is to say, to posit acting as the activity from which they would henceforth derive their subsistence and to bind themselves in a business partnership before a notary public, were the members of the Fraternal Compagnia of 1545. The constitution of this Fraternal Company belongs to the immediate prehistory of the commedia dell’arte, which had not yet emerged as a commercial enterprise, but it marks the professionalization of acting without which the very possibility of commedia dell’arte and its separation from the underworld of the charlatan would be totally unthinkable (Molinari 1985, p. 65). The Fraternal Company was soon followed by many others, from whose work the new art form quickly took shape and rose, with lightening speed, to great distinction. Very probably, among the commedia dell’arte actors of the first generation there were scoundrels and criminals of all kinds, but as Winifred Smith put it, this minority has, for the most part, “passed into oblivion, leaving to the historian a sense of their presence that
is like a dark mist around the bright light shining from the memory of their leaders” (Smith 1930, p. 14).

Between the years 1570 and 1780, which indicate, respectively, the lower and the upper chronological limits of the triumph of the commedia dell’arte phenomenon throughout Europe, there were at least 550 actors, whose names are recorded in the literature and in business transactions. But what of the others whose names are not on any record? The seventeenth-century actor Niccolò Barbieri, who was himself a star of the first magnitude and who, after many years of experience, wrote in defense of the profession, claimed that out of every ten players who passed themselves off as commedia dell’arte actors only one was actually good enough to merit that recognition, and, we can add, to be remembered by posterity (cited in Bartoli 1890, p. lxxvi). However large an allowance for rhetoric and error we may wish to make, it is clear from Barbieri’s statement that the figure of 550 represents only a fraction of the total number of professional actors devoted to the practice of commedia dell’arte.

In the seventeenth century, these actors were organized into thirty-six professional companies, a number that was to rise to sixty-four in the eighteenth century (Molinari 1985, p. 93). Their performances at first took place in the piazzas, streets, and market places of northern Italy, as small family companies proliferated and continued to provide entertainment for the lower classes that would normally gather there. But commedia dell’arte performers very quickly gained admittance to courtly settings and spread to every corner of Italy and much of Europe. Indeed, no other theatrical genre can boast to have achieved such success at all levels of society throughout its history. As early as 1572, the Company of the Confidenti was performing in Paris, as was the famous Company of the Gelosi in 1577 and the Company of the Accesi in 1599, under the protection of the king of France. The Company of Zan Ganassa performed in several cities of Spain by order of Phillip II between 1574 and 1579, while the Company of the Fedeli performed at the court of Vienna for emperor Ferdinand II, and the Company of the Uniti performed before the Duke of Mantua and the Duke of Savoy.

By 1570 or so several of the stock characters of the commedia dell’arte had been implanted in the popular imagination and a number of its performance conventions had been established in a sufficiently successful manner to become susceptible of appropriation by other arts, and to be usefully grafted onto conventions of other origins by aristocratic and scholarly amateurs with a keen interest in adapting commedia dell’arte for genteel settings. The earliest detailed account of a commedia dell’arte show in such a setting is in fact a description by the Neapolitan composer Massimo Troiano of a performance that took place in 1568 at the court of Munich, on the occasion of the wedding of Duke Wilhelm V to Renate of Lorraine. It was directed by the celebrated
composer Orlando di Lasso, and it was performed by various courtiers and court musicians (Troiano 1994, pp. 15–22). During the last decade of the century, other Italian composers, most notably Orazio Vecchi and Adriano Banchieri, developed the genre of madrigal comedies, in which commedia dell’arte characters spoke to each other in madrigals, performed as sequences of solo and choral numbers.

From such early refined settings, years before Italians had public theaters, commedia dell’arte insinuated itself into the imagination of the aristocracy, so much so that even the great pope Benedict XIV, the witty Prospero Lambertini, found nothing indecorous in publicly recalling with pleasure that, before being raised to throne of St. Peter, he had himself frequently played before groups of academics the role of the loquacious Dottore, one of the chief stock characters of the commedia dell’arte tradition and the pope’s most famous fictional compatriot from Bologna (Oreglia 1968, p. 86). From the stalls of the market place to the academies of the learned and the salons of the rich and mighty, commedia dell’arte had found a way of catering to the entire spectrum of human taste for derision, adapting, as the occasion required, its usual broad and rustic manner to the delicate sensitivities of audiences accustomed to other art forms.

These quick references to the protean capacity with which commedia dell’arte was endowed to appeal to diverse social classes raises legitimate questions about its artistic core. Yet it is clear that, next to its capacity to generate earthy laughter and to its penchant for ribaldry, the refined attitude that it occasionally assumed in academic and aristocratic settings was a comparatively minor mode. From the beginning, however, the commedia dell’arte had great potential for upward movement, both socially and culturally. But mainstream commedia dell’arte was first of all a type of farce, based on the broad humor that is proper to the genre, and was very obviously conditioned in its early development by its roots in the market place. For it was there that its performers realized that, instead of peddling elixirs and medicaments, they could develop a product of their own—improvised theatrical entertainment. It could not be manufactured by others and, judged by the success of many charlatans, it appeared to be in demand among large sectors of the population.

### Audience complicity

Improvised comic entertainment was designed to appeal immediately to the audience, while avoiding any reprisals from those who might disapprove of it. Since in all likelihood the audience consisted chiefly of men from the same class as the performers, the successful stage act contained an explicitly erotic dimension and its social message emerged directly from the
ideological stance of that class. Given the political culture of the times—the Counter-Reformation in the second half of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—there could be no printed or written record of what was said or done on stage. In this way, the requirements for a farcical package of reasonably assured success were set: the performance must introduce women on stage, must direct laughter at the perceived enemies and rivals of the audience, and, since it could not make use of a script, it must be improvised directly on stage on the basis of an innocently brief outline.

Frequently, an organized public performance ends up having a long-term function in society and culture that is quite distinct from the one originally intended and may cause them to develop in an unforeseen direction. In the early stages of the commedia dell’arte tradition, the intended effect of actresses on stage, at times scantily dressed, was to cater to the sexual imagination of a predominantly male audience, quite simply because that was good business. It was, in other words, no more than a scheme for the sexual exploitation of women members of the company, at a time when to exhibit a woman on stage, though not necessarily forbidden by the law, was decidedly a scandalous gesture. The Jesuit Domenico Ottonelli thundered down on commedia dell’arte players misogynous quotations from the fathers of the church, saying that the idea of allowing women on stage had been imparted to them directly by the devil (Taviani and Schino 1982, p. 158). But even the certainly less biased actor Niccolò Barbieri admitted that, in the early days of commedia dell’arte, scenes with half-naked or completely naked women, covered by a transparent veil, were not at all infrequent (Bartoli 1890, p. xci). Yet, the unforeseen social function of the decision to exploit the sexual appeal of women on stage turned out to be easily the most important development possible since the very beginning of Western theater history. Stage careers suddenly became available to women in Italy long before this was even conceivable in other countries. It is a great testimonial to the intelligence, talent, and dedication of the first actresses of the commedia dell’arte tradition if, within a few years, they were no longer regarded as near-prostitutes, other than by the likes of Ottonelli, but as noble divas worthy of the most exalted tributes. In the seventeenth century, there were at least 160 commedia dell’arte actresses whose names are still available to us (Molinari 1985, p. 93). The brightest star among them was, of course, Isabella Andreini, the first diva of the European stage, but a number of other actresses were worthy of her company and “vied with her for honours on the stage” (Kerr 2015, p. 102).

As a result of improvisation, which is easily the most famous distinctive feature of commedia dell’arte performers, the psychology of women characters changed drastically. With rare exceptions, the female characters of scripted drama were conceived by male playwrights and were meant to be performed by teenage boys. In commedia dell’arte the roles of female characters were
given life on stage by women, who conceived their words, their psychology, and their gestures through their own imagination and bodies. The formidable significance of this fact in the history of the theater is something that our own age, with its greater sensitivity to gender issues and its more enlightened understanding of the plight of women in history, is perhaps better equipped to appreciate.

One of the intended functions of improvisation was to enable the performers to avoid censorship, guaranteeing the players a certain degree of impunity. It was able to accomplish this in a very large measure throughout the tradition. In 1578, Gabriele Paleotti, archbishop of Bologna and an experienced censor of printed materials, lamented to the Curia that his efforts were being frustrated by commedia dell’arte performers, since they wrote down only a brief summary of the story and then went on stage to say and to do all sorts of things for which they should, but could not, be censored. The unforeseen long-term social function of improvisation was to create actors of a different kind, distinguished by their amazing ability to perform a full play impromptu before an audience, composing signifying structures informed by aesthetic as well as ideological considerations.

The ideological stance of the early commedia dell’arte players, as determined chiefly by their loyalty to the audience that they chiefly served, is not at all difficult to define, but it does require dispelling the still enduring notion that, at the theoretical level at least, it is sufficient to study commedia dell’arte as a form of pure theatricality in isolation from ideology. That this is historically incorrect requires no argument, so strong is the evidence that derives from the economic circumstances and the material conditions of its first performances. That it is theoretically unsound is clear from the consideration that comedic laughter, whether in a farce or in a play of refined witticisms, is never the innocent activity that it appears to be. To laugh at stock characters is to laugh at the social groups they represent by abstraction and stylization, to deride them, to ridicule them, to raise public opinion against them, and to attempt to ostracize them from the community. That is why no laughter-inducing device may be regarded as innocent theatricality, and why the social location of each character is especially significant.

**Characters and actors**

When the tradition is considered in its entirety, the stock characters of the commedia dell’arte constitute a very large gallery of figures. But if we focus on the different periods of its history, we find that the list of characters tends to be dominated by the same types. In most of the seventeenth century, canonical performances in northern Italy included two masked old men. One
is a businessman from Venice, who is known at first as Magnifico but later and for the whole tradition as Pantalone, who speaks Venetian, is stingy, shamelessly chases young girls, and wears a costume reminiscent of Venetian merchants. The other is an academic from Bologna, usually a professor of law or a jurist of sorts known generically as the Dottore, whose speech is a variety of Bolognese generously sprinkled with Latin expressions, arranged in syntactical structures that, more frequently than not, lead him into absurd circumlocutions or interminable tirades. The other characters included two masked servants, known in the jargon as first and second zanni, the term from which we get the English zany, a word that accurately describes a good part of their behavior. The most usual zanni are Brighella and Arlecchino, both of whom emigrated from Bergamo to Venice, where they have secured humble jobs, though Brighella, who is smarter and more successful, is able to wear the livery of a personal valet and to speak decent Venetian, while Arlecchino wears a patchwork costume that is a stylistic representation of his poverty and speaks his native vernacular. There were also two young lovers, dressed in the latest fashion and known by several names, who spoke a variety of literary Italian, replete with melodramatic cliches and obvious rhetorical figures. There was a maid, also known by several names, who genuinely assisted her mistress in matters of the heart while pursuing her own more lusty interests on the side. And, finally, there was a captain, or a braggart soldier, of Spanish origin, and therefore speaking a hybrid language. In the southern variety of commedia dell’arte there were different characters with parallel functions—Pulcinella, or the Neapolitan servant, rather than Arlecchino, Tartaglia, or the stuttering know-it-all, rather than Dottore, and so on—but the basic types that they represent and the social co-ordinates by which they are defined are very similar.

In each case the object of derision is clear. The first is the power of money, best typified by the merchant class of Venice, which was perhaps the fastest growing concentration of wealthy people in the peninsula. In commedia dell’arte performances it is represented from the perspective of the lower-class audience, which could see the accumulation of wealth only as the result of unscrupulous business practices, by undeserving, immoral, stingy, arrogant men. The second is the power of higher education, best represented by Bologna, the city with the most prestigious university in Italy. In those hallowed halls a culture was being manufactured that did not seem to have any relation whatsoever to the economic and cultural conditions of the audience, to whom academic language was little more than gibberish in the mouths of pedantic dandies. The third was the economic intrusion of immigrants from the poorer regions of the country, presented by commedia dell’arte, on the one hand, as hungry ruffians ready to snatch any opportunity that comes their way, and, on the other hand, with understated admiration...
for their ingenuity and their stamina. The fourth is romance, generally thought to be unattainable by the audience, which, at least since the diffusion of the courtly love tradition in the late Middle Ages, had been accustomed by their culture to the idea that the members of the lower classes are not capable of feeling refined sentiments. Rather, they were concerned more with satisfying physical urges and practical needs than with the noble pursuit of sentiment, which was therefore presented on stage with both derision and admiration. The fifth is military oppression, and in the seventeenth century this was represented in large areas of Italy by the Spanish army.

The dramatic actions by which the commedia dell’arte characters are linked in the repertoire are many and cannot be reduced to one simple structure, but the most common type, especially in the middle period of the history of the commedia dell’arte, is normally a version of the traditional love story: the young lovers wish to marry, but in their efforts to accomplish this, they are met with serious obstacles, due to both chance and design, and, consequently, the play records their complex vicissitudes as they finally get together with the help of their servants.

The interrelations of these characters served the commedia dell’arte troupes well for a long time, enabling them to work like efficient machines, capable of shaping and reshaping in interesting ways the material in the repertoire and of speaking to the social and political concerns of their audiences. The dramatic form that made this possible was the product of an evolution that, in terms of cultural history, was starting to be noticeably long, and that, by the early eighteenth century, seemed to have reached a plateau, where virtuosic ingenuity was not as plentiful as it had been at the beginning, when actors could rely neither on a compositional system nor on a tradition of stage tricks for their success. At this stage of its development, however, form was getting perilously close to formula, and hence was open to challenge.

The commedia dell’Arte in the age of Enlightenment

The story of the commedia dell’arte in the last few years of the second and in the whole of the third quarters of the eighteenth century has four protagonists whose careers taken together defined its current status and were to determine its future destiny. These are the playwrights Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi, and the actor managers Girolamo Medebach and Antonio Sacchi, all of whom, in different measures and for different reasons, found themselves assuming sharply defined aesthetic positions and entangled in a series of uneasy professional relations for several tumultuous years in the
silver age of the improvised genre. By the mid-eighteenth century, commedia dell’arte was in fact on the wane: it no longer had any clear and coherent relation to reality, it visibly strained to live up to its reputation for inventiveness, and it found itself virtually untouched by the winds of change that were then sweeping all over Europe. Commedia dell’arte had apparently become too old and too tired, its creative imagination enfeebled by two centuries of dynamic activity, so that now it relied on rote and trivialities more frequently than not, and easily relinquished its original role as an instrument of transgression and as a vehicle for radical criticism: its broad humor had lost energy and direction, and its public was in the market for other forms of entertainment.

The stock characters of the commedia dell’arte were still very much alive, of course, both on stage and in the popular imagination, but because the type of existence that they could lead in this chapter of their history was conditioned by the artistic skill of the performers who improvised them into being on stage, they could know only rare flashes of brilliance. There were some very talented actors capable of raising them to the distinction of great art—Cesare D’Arbes as Pantalone, Giuseppe Marliani as Brighella, Maddalena Marliani as Corallina, Girolamo Medebach as the innamorato, and Antonio Sacchi as Truffaldino could easily be numbered among the most talented commedia dell’arte performers of the entire tradition—but they were too few for the large market of the cosmopolitan eighteenth century. To be sure, the best among them had the power and the artistic authority to affect greatly the stage life of the characters they impersonated—Sacchi gave such distinction to his Arlecchino that he changed his name to Truffaldino while he became known as Truffaldino Sacchi—but they could hardly influence the course on which commedia dell’arte as a whole seemed embarked without the guidance of an artist of genius capable of assuming responsibility for the behavior of all the characters, not, as was done previously by the concertatore, by reconfiguring worn out elements into a fresh performance, but by creating original plot situations in which the players could both flourish technically and make plain the thematic relevance of the genre to society.

Goldoni was clearly such an artist, and, very early in his career as a playwright, when in fact he was still a practicing lawyer, he temporarily lent his services to Antonio Sacchi, who, upon his return from a three-year tour of Russia, commissioned from him a scenario centered on Truffaldino in the act of serving two masters. That is when he wrote for Sacchi’s celebrated company the scenario for The Servant of Two Masters (Il servitore di due padroni, 1745), in which the stock characters are divested of moral mediocrity and, through the filter of wit and physical humor, are made to represent positive social values and to have clear referents in society: Pantalone is not an old lecher and the Dottore is not a vacuous pedant, but both are family...
men, one a member of the contemporary Venetian business class and the other a member of its legal establishment, and both are concerned about the honor and well-being of their children. This was a small attempt to inject new life into commedia dell’arte from the inside, while constructing a scenario of a technical sophistication commensurate with the skill of a brilliant actor.

The problems, however, were still of a vast magnitude. Goldoni’s and Sacchi’s *Servant of Two Masters* was but a small detail in the world of commedia dell’arte performance. The rest of the picture consisted of formidable obstacles to reform. A middle-class Pantalone who behaved like a shameless pimp, a peasant Arlecchino who could use his slapstick with impunity on his master, a Columbine driven by a libido thought typical of lower-class maids, a Dottore who exemplified with every word that he uttered the emptiness of the very education on which the Enlightenment idea of progress was predicated, episodes of improvised dialogue that most people had heard before, and comic routines that relied on explicit obscenity for their success—these could not be the formal elements of a national bourgeois drama fully committed to a serious program of artistic and social change, in alignment with the fundamental teachings of the Enlightenment. Commedia dell’arte had unwittingly given itself a right-wing ideological charge that made it stand as an obstacle to reforms capable of improving the social status of the people that it purported to represent on stage, and hence capable of raising its art to a higher level of aesthetic dignity.

Therefore, despite the success of *The Servant of Two Masters*, no doubt due chiefly to the great skill of Sacchi as an impromptu performer, Goldoni soon decided that changes from the inside were not enough to steer the commedia dell’arte away from the great sea of artistic and social mediocrity toward which it seemed to be directed. The reasons were not difficult to see: unlike Sacchi, most actors were not equal to their tasks, the performance conventions that governed the genre had reached a stage that did not allow significant development in the absence of great talent, and theater audiences had seen too many repetitions of the same antics and too many variations of scatological silliness to continue supporting the genre on the promise of rejuvenation made by actors who were here today and gone tomorrow. Such infusion of new energy from the inside did not seem sufficient to yield results of any historical significance. And so Goldoni resolved to destroy the commedia dell’arte altogether, to embark on a systematic program of reform designed to transform in a radical manner the comic stage, gradually expelling the stock characters, the typical plot situations, the coarse humor, and finally all vestiges of the genre from the professional theater. To this end, in 1748 he joined the company of Girolamo Medebach, who espoused Goldoni’s ideas and who readily consented to the use of his company as the instrument of Goldoni’s vision.
Two years in his contract with Medebach as company playwright, Goldoni had a most productive season. In 1750 he wrote sixteen full-length plays, including one called *The Comic Theatre (Il teatro comico)* which is, among other things, a critique of the commedia dell’arte of his day and a dramatized poetics of the scripted genre with which he aimed to replace the commedia dell’arte on stage. It is in this work that the expression “commedia dell’arte” occurs for the first time in history. Goldoni uses it to distinguish the conventional *commedie dell’arte* from the character-based comedies or *commedie di carattere* with which he intended to replace them. The irony of history is that the name by which the commedia dell’arte tradition is generally known comes to it from the work that was meant to be its death certificate.

In Goldoni’s reform, the playwright assumed total control of the dramatic action, of its ideological orientation, and of the nature of its characters; the actors were no more than the means through which his work, that is to say, his view of dramatic art, social reality, and human nature, achieved material existence on stage. Audiences might become easily accustomed to this, since they were thirsty for original dramatic actions, but actors were bound to react with some antagonism, since their traditional authorial function was being taken away from them. Goldoni’s proposal was bound to throw the entire profession into a state of crisis—not unlike the one that occurred much later in the cinema with the introduction of sound—since actors who excelled without a script, creating their own words in the very act of performing them while donning the characteristic masks of their characters, did not necessarily know how to give life to words written by someone else and meant to be performed with an uncovered face.

Medebach, however, agreed to the reform program, and despite occasional moments of tension in their relationship, due mostly to his tight control of the company’s production budget and to Goldoni’s inability to get along with Teodora Medebach, the beautiful and talented prima donna of the company and Girolamo’s beloved wife, their partnership worked so well that it all but enabled them to expel commedia dell’arte improvisation from the mainstream comic stage in a relatively short time. Concessions, of course, had to be made along the way, since even the actors of Medebach’s company and their most loyal audiences needed time to get used to the new style of theater making. Masks and dialects were removed gradually, as were other defining features of the stock characters, until the new agents of dramatic action could emerge on their own as independently conceived fictional persons, each with a unique social and psychological profile, and until the gross verbal heterogeneity of commedia dell’arte performances could be reduced to a more or less homogeneous universe of human discourse.

In the first production of *The Mistress of the Inn (La locandiera, 1752)*, a scripted play that belongs to the early post-reform period of Goldoni’s career
as a playwright, the role of Fabrizio was played in Venetian because Giuseppe Marliani, who, as Brighella, had always acted in dialect, found himself unable to perform it in Italian (Goldoni 1976, p. 93). And in the *The Comic Theatre* we are told that actors accustomed to working with masks find it extremely difficult to perform without them. But in this regard Goldoni was very fortunate, since in Medebach's company both Giuseppe Marliani and Cesare D'Arbes had quickly learned the new skill and, especially the latter, could easily perform without a mask. When D'Arbes left for Dresden at the invitation of the King of Poland's ambassador to Venice, he was immediately replaced by Antonio Mattiuzzi Collalto, an actor willing to learn how to make his own the maskless Pantalone left by D'Arbes.

It may be of interest to note that a similar phenomenon, though in the reverse direction, occurred two centuries later when, in Giorgio Strehler's first production of the *Servant of Two Masters*, which marks a very significant attempt of the modern stage to retrieve commedia dell'arte techniques in the most authentic form possible after two centuries of theater history, the distinguished actor Marcello Moretti was unable to perform the role of Arlecchino with a commedia dell'arte mask, and for some time resorted to playing him with a painted mask on his face, until he gradually learned to harness the expressive energy that a real one could lend to his performance.

In order to appreciate just how far-reaching the consequences of this change were in Goldoni's time, we would do well to consider the nature of commedia dell'arte masks and the implications that they have for the actor's style of performance. Their most important features are: first, the eye holes are very small, no larger in fact than the irises of the performer's eyes, and, second, the mask does not sit adjacent to the performer's eyelids but is removed from them by at least a centimeter, almost as far as the lenses of our eyeglasses are from our own eyes. The inference here is that the performer has no lateral vision whatsoever, that he sees the outside world through two narrow tunnels, as if through binoculars without magnification, and that, as a consequence, he must continually move his head back and forth and side to side very quickly in the direction of the sounds and voices to which he must respond, and up and down, in order to see where to place his feet as he crosses the stage. The net effect of this performance style is that a character such as Arlecchino appears to be a hybrid creature artificially compounded of the mechanical and the human, a comic denizen of a different world, where the principle of verisimilitude, by which we tend to judge the connection between fictional characters and reality in our own, has no status whatsoever. When we remove his mask, we automatically make him a citizen of our world, giving him a human face and endowing him with a physical vocabulary that has little of the alien in it. Complex human sentiments, albeit within the limits of social and psychological typification appropriate to the
comedic stage before the age of naturalism, are but a short step away. When we reach that point, commedia dell’arte is no more.

One can easily see why an actor such as Antonio Sacchi, who was then at the height of his career and an international celebrity as a virtuoso of the commedia dell’arte stage, should view Goldoni’s and Medebach’s plans with hostility, for theirs was a concerted effort to annihilate the world in which he and the members of his company had experienced great moments of glory. He was surely the most talented impromptu performer of his day, and he disapproved of acting without a mask. He therefore had at least two reasons to object to Goldoni’s reform program, since he neither saw the need to change the nature of the character that he impersonated with such distinction in the theaters of various countries nor wished to be cast in plays in which stage importance was more equally distributed among the characters. What he wanted was a scenario such as *The Servant of Two Masters*, centered on his fantastic ability to improvise as the masked Truffaldino that he had created. Goldoni’s plans to transform the commedia dell’arte into scripted bourgeois drama seemed designed to pull the carpet from under his feet. And so, as Medebach had joined forces with Goldoni, Sacchi now entered into a partnership with Carlo Gozzi, Goldoni’s arch-rival in Venice, an unyielding champion of the commedia dell’arte, a die-hard defender of the rights of the aristocracy, and a fierce enemy of the social liberalism predicated everywhere on the social theory of the Enlightenment. The Gozzi–Sacchi partnership lasted from 1761 to 1783, when the company was dissolved, and during these two decades together they succeeded in reviving interest in the commedia dell’arte and of temporarily reestablishing in some theaters its ancient claim to preeminence.

Goldoni’s critique, however, had left a permanent mark on the commedia dell’arte, a mark that had already altered its course even in the theaters and in the books of those who sought to revive it in its purest form. Gozzi wrote only one scenario for Sacchi’s company to improvise as in the pre-reform days, and that was the famous *Love of Three Oranges*, a polemical allegory in which an audience’s melancholy, caused by a self-proclaimed reform of the stage, was finally dispelled by commedia dell’arte itself, as represented by Truffaldino–Sacchi. In the remaining commedia dell’arte plays that Gozzi wrote for the company, improvisation is reserved only for Sacchi and, less frequently, other performers of masked roles, all other actors being required to adhere closely to a script. The reason for this is very clear: as Goldoni had seen fit to use the stage as a forum for an ideology of social reform, so Gozzi wanted to use it as an instrument for combating such reforms and as the center of irradiation of a philosophy of counter-Enlightenment and anti-materialism. He would have had little control over the situation if he had limited himself to the scenario form. We observe here a very interesting phenomenon: extempore
acting was progressively replaced by script-based acting, and the ruling class, which had been the commedia dell’arte’s object of derision for so long, was now becoming the class of its sponsors and patrons. The art of commedia, it seems, has gone round a full circle, becoming an instrument of political dominance and counter-Enlightenment.

In all fairness to Gozzi, it should be mentioned that even the liberal Goldoni wrote in *The Comic Theatre* (I.12) that he did not think it decorous that servants should apply their slapsticks to their masters’ backs. This view cannot be interpreted only as an appeal to the principle of verisimilitude in the imitation of reality, though it surely is that as well. It is also a sign of the nonsubversive nature of Goldoni vision of reform—an inference that makes good sense when we recall that he died a pauper in France relying for his support on the losing side of the revolution. By situating the playwright in the position of authority, both Gozzi and Goldoni sought to control the dramatic action and to make sure that, whatever the quality of the performance, it adhered to what they regarded as a correct vision of reality. However, Gozzi’s appropriation of commedia dell’arte for the ruling class, as a tool for teaching that the political order is not to be disturbed because it is in accordance with the laws of the universe, and that the new philosophy of the Enlightenment is nothing but perverse speculation on human nature and society—this is the very opposite of what commedia dell’arte had originally purported to do, when it had resorted to improvisation in order to avoid censorship and bamboozle the authorities with the power of derision. Commedia dell’arte now sided with the authorities, and it gladly aided them in the business of dominance to the best of its ability, enlisting in its new service some of the greatest talents in the professional community.
In improvised theater, the performance text does not have any prior existence as a script. Its existence is limited to the time in which it is experienced by the audience. Only from the audience’s perspective can it be perceived in its entirety at any instant of its duration, and the audience is not normally capable of perceiving it other than in its semiotic fullness, as the simultaneous operation of various codes, at any instant of its unfolding. If the performance text is segmented into elementary units of duration, minimal signifying sections that cannot be further subdivided without dissolving away its internal logic of signification and hence its uniqueness as performance text, we are left with an array of signs arranged for simultaneous operation in the collaborative construction of sense. The array consists of a multilayered semiotic structure that includes set, costumes, movement, gestures, and speech, each contributing to the meaning and aesthetic purport of the developing text. Its communicative structure, as it reveals itself in the audience’s field of perception, is a stratified whole of various codes in simultaneous operation.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the constituent parts of the improvised performance text as the elements of its semiotic form, phenomenologically understood as a configuration in which “the sensory value of each element is determined by its function in the whole” (Merleau-Ponty 1967, p. 168). Such a form is the result of an abstraction process designed to reveal the skeletal structure presupposed by all real improvisations as the explanatory principle of their semiotic and aesthetic makeup. If the performance text could be written out in full, we would have to imagine it as a musical score, written on several lines that move forward together in time (Pagnini 1970, p. 121). The lines of the performance score are the different codes employed in the phonic and visual materialization of the text. At any
given point of the process, for each actor on stage, the verbal and visual codes used to improvise the text are hierarchically related, though typically in the commedia dell’arte tradition the degree of their relative dominance may vary from one scene to the next. Costumes, sets, and lights are, in general, additive constants and do not concern improvisation. They are part of the semiotic array of the text, but they do not change from one moment to the next. When they do change—usually at scene transition—the modification is not normally caused by the actor engaged in improvisation. The performance vocabulary consists of speech, gestures, and stage movement, the semiotic value of which is presumed to be familiar to the audience. The actors’ ability to weave that vocabulary into the representation of a dramatic action is the result of native ability and sophisticated training.

Verbal and visual signs

In his discussion of the legacy of the second Sophistic to the late Middle Ages, Charles Baldwin described improvisation as “fluency of rehandling” (Baldwin 1928, p. 15). Though used by Baldwin primarily with reference to the verbal component of speech making, conceptually this formula covers also the gestural component to which the verbal one is united in delivery. It is therefore a convenient starting point for an examination of the mixed semiotic base of stage improvisation. Previously encountered visual and verbal material, committed to memory, is recalled and used again with relative ease in new contexts and variations. Accordingly, the first step in a training program in improvisation is to accumulate a stock of useful material, to acquire a performance vocabulary sufficient to meet the communicative requirements of the situations that are likely to arise in the dramatic action. At each stage of its development, the performance text is focused on a particular verbal or visual message. The performer selectively recalls from stock verbal and visual signs associated in his mind with the ones at the focal point of a given unit of performance text and proceeds to use them, following the semantic logic of the dramatic action.

The principle by which performance vocabulary is enriched for use in improvised performance is synonymy. From classical antiquity on, the compositional use of synonymy for the purpose of enlarging a theme, for rhetorical as well as artistic reasons, was articulated as the trope synonymia, namely the restatement of ideas with the introduction of gradual variations. For centuries, synonymy was the chief rhetorical base for thematic amplification. In the Renaissance, it was also a cornerstone of language instruction and of training in the art of extemporaneous speech. The following passage from Erasmus’s *De Copia* summarizes the situation with great clarity:
And just as the eye is held more by a varying scene, in the same way the mind always eagerly examines whatever it sees as new. And if all things continually present themselves to the mind without variation, it will at once turn away in disgust. Thus the whole profit of a speech is lost. This great fault he will shun easily who is prepared to turn the same thought into many forms, as the famous Proteus is said to have changed his form. And in truth this training will contribute greatly to skill in extemporaneous speaking or writing; it will assure that we will not frequently hesitate in bewilderment or keep shamefully silent. Nor will it be difficult, with so many formulas prepared in readiness for action, to aptly divert even a rashly begun speech in any desired direction. (Erasmus 1963, p. 17)

Although written for advanced students of Latin, Erasmus's *De Copia* is highly relevant to the mechanics of stage improvisation. Turning the same thought into different forms and saying the same thing in different ways, each only slightly different from the other and each linked to another network of words, concepts, and images, is to invoke the principle of synonymy as a the principle for vocabulary building and fluency. Applying the same principle to words and phrases already used is a way of glossing them with words that restate the same thing differently, advancing the movement of thought in the process. The emphasis on synonymy as a key to fluency was indeed, as Sylvia Adamson (Adamson 2007, p. 24) has observed, a standard pedagogical principle in the educational program of the Renaissance. The fact that fluency was also the foundation of the art of stage improvisation enables us to surmise that training in the latter was analogous to humanistic language pedagogy. This justifies using works such as *De Copia* as sources of insight in the parallel study of stage improvisation.

In Erasmus, synonymy is one of the major sources of variation, understood as a fundamental precept of all improvisation. The significance of this paragraph, and of others like it in the works of Erasmus, is manifold. In the first place, it speaks of training in the art of improvisation and provides the reader with a set of techniques and exercises with which he can develop his skill: reading as much as possible, glossing what one reads with equivalent or nearly equivalent expressions, committing as many of these to memory like “so many formulas prepared in readiness for action,” which is to say, for extemporaneous speech on a given topic. Memory is the basis of recitation in the scripted drama as well as in the improvised one, but whereas in the former memory is a means of reproducing the exact text of the speech, in the latter it is only a base from which to come up with an appropriate variation and subsequent development of a statement. Glossing and memorizing are first of all ways of assimilating a wider vocabulary and of mastering a larger number of collocations, but they are also ways of building up the habit of using
rhetorical figures to compose variations on a theme and different elaborations of a narrative nucleus. A number of figures, Erasmus says citing Quintilian (10.5.9), can be made using the same wax.

In the improvised drama of the commedia dell’arte tradition, the simplest and clearest examples of variation by synonymy may be found in the repertoire of the two lovers. Their dialogue typically includes a statement of their attitude toward each other, articulated mostly as adulation or disdain, and a number of repetitions with lexical changes. Variation in such cases must be understood as a technical term with a meaning similar to the one that it has in music. It is a form of repetition with minimum alteration, while remaining within the rules of form and within the aesthetic parameters of the art. The lovers’ initial mode of address may be invented or taken from literary memory. In either case, it is formulaic, consisting, at the simplest level, of basic expressions of emotions—such as, “I adore you” and “I detest you”—that are easy to restate with gradual alteration of their meaning. The length of the linguistic segment chosen as a semiotic unit to be altered by synonymy is an indication of the degree of syntactical complexity potentially involved in the improvising process. In *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577), Henry Peacham is concerned with the potential aesthetic yield of such a process. He observes that the textual segment subjected to expansion by synonymic glossing can vary from a single word to a complete sentence, adding that, when it is handled with skill, synonymia “delighteth much.” Insofar as it introduces variations of the same theme, the improvisational process may be pictured as a continuous change of costume by the same actor on stage. Such glossing “adorneth and garnisheth speech, as a rich and plentiful wardrop, wherein are many, and sundry changes of garments, to bewtifie one and the same person,” observes Peacham in the 1593 edition of his treatise (cited in Adamson 2007, p. 27). As a text-building strategy, synonymia may have little aesthetic appeal for modern taste, which may regard synonymic fluency as empty tautology. But we can be sure that it was highly esteemed in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the centuries considered the golden age of commedia dell’arte improvisation. The actors improvise the lovers’ dialogue by subjecting their own or each other’s enunciations to glossing by synonymy in a manner that keeps the dialogue moving forward while displaying the extent of their verbal repertoire and their skill at composition by variation.

Alongside the verbal repertoire, the improviser must also cultivate his range of gestural signs. A significant distinction between the gestural and the verbal vocabulary for the stage is the different number of signs that they include. Although the human body can produce a very large number of gestures, the set of those appropriate for the stage as purposeful signifiers is relatively small. The reasons for this limitation are that the gestures have to be amplifiable for visibility, stylisable for easy comprehension, and adaptable to a
variety of situations. A major semantic consequence of the narrowness of the repertoire is that many theatrical gestures are polysemous. The same posture or facial expression can be used to convey different ideas and to express different emotional states. The acquisition of fluency for effective improvisation depends on the actor’s ability to determine the biomechanical parameters into which particular actions can be resolved and to produce variations by altering such things as the rhythm, timing, and chirality of actions without changing the design on which their semantic recognition is based. Such gestural fluency can enable the actors to force relatively narrow repertoires to meet the requirements of a multitude of dramatic situations.

In the creation of dialogue, the training exercise outlined in the *De Copia* is a simple extension of the one for solo performance. Erasmus suggests that two students train together, offering each other sentences to vary and elaborate, thereby producing dialogue. This means that they also communicate by gestures. A significant part of gestural fluency in communicating by facial expressions is virtually automatic as an occurrence of spontaneous facial mimicry. Well known to the psychology of social encounters, facial mimicry refers to the fact that, when one person engages another in face-to-face conversation, the listener tends to assume a facial expression that resembles that of the speaker and hence displays a readiness to respond verbally in an appropriate manner. If there is no conscious effort to restrain it, the listener’s sympathetic imitation of the speaker’s gestural expression is automatic and virtually instantaneous. This display of gestural contact can also be observed on stage between actors, such as those impersonating the young lovers, who are not wearing masks. The subtlety of their facial display, however, has only a limited effect on the audience, because the average visual acuity (1 minute of arc) is such that at distances greater than 50 feet, subtle changes in the expression of the eyes and face are not perceptible (Burris-Meyer and Cole 1964, p. 67). In modern small theaters, in which the house is in the dark and the stage well lit, this is not a huge problem for a good part of the audience, but when the theaters were still lit by side candles and footlights, the low luminosity and the unnatural shadows on the face attenuated considerably the communicative power of facial signs.

The actors, however, could see each other perfectly. As two people in conversation, they could respond facially to each other’s display of emotion and intention. Such a response does not necessarily presuppose a naturalistic approach to acting. It does not imply that, in their acting, the actors behave as if they were characters constructed to resemble human beings in all respects, psychologically as well as physically. What it does imply is that the listening actor feels drawn into a biophysical state of readiness analogous to that of the speaking actor and proceeds to impersonate his own character accordingly. The facial signs of the emotions usually at the center of lovers’ meetings in
commedia dell’arte scenarios—joy and sadness—have a double role to play: one is to display the psychological state of the character being portrayed, the other to transmit an emotional signal to the other actor, thereby establishing a base for a dynamic flow of conversation. In dialogical improvisation, facial gestures are indexical signs that have not only an expressive function with respect to the speaker, as a physical manifestation of an internal state of being, but also a conative function with respect to the other performer, who is invited to give a certain kind of response and automatically to put himself into a state of readiness to give it. In the latter function, the facial gesture is a cue to the silent actor, prompting him to respond in a psychologically appropriate way. At the same time it is an aid, since the speaking actor’s facial expression draws the listening actor into his psychological sphere, inducing him to modulate his gestures and voice accordingly. The inference that we can draw from this state of affairs is that the spontaneous mimicry of facial muscles is an expression of teamwork at its most intimate level. Improvising the performance text of a lovers’ dialogue carries a greater risk of failure than the rehearsed performance of a scripted dialogue. In order to reduce the risk, the actors must work in concert, in a relationship of trust and collaboration, with intimate knowledge of each other’s facial vocabulary. They must be equally prepared to react creatively to each other in the joint construction of a text that is both cognitively satisfying and aesthetically gratifying.

The reciprocal effect of such prompting may be understood as a form of empathetic kinesthesia or the sense of movement experienced by an actor in his own body when he perceives the movements performed by his interlocutor, if they relate to one another with authentic openness to each other’s influence. That makes for ideal acting in the joint improvisation of performance text. To the extent that such movements are then perceived by the audience, the kinesthetic response that they provoke is a basis for their aesthetic valuation of the physical part of a performance, understood as a lived experience in artistic semiosis. In both cases, the performing body mysteriously communicates to other bodies by activating in them a vicarious experience and a muscular understanding of the movement, however subtle, performed as a signifying structure. In neither case can perception be considered a passive absorption of messages. Genuine openness to the intuitive decoding of movement implies that for the actors the act of perception is not a passive reception of information but the active retrieval of sense from the musculature beneath the gestures.

Of all the signs that can appear on the unmasked face, those produced by the eyes are by far the most powerful. The eyes have traditionally been considered windows of the soul and channels for the expression of emotions. Considered as signs that express emotions, the eyes are indexically related to their referent because they are indistinguishable from the internal source
of the emotions. Indeed, for the eighteenth-century theorist of acting, Franz Lang, the eyes are the seat itself of the emotions. They have greater signifying power than language, and they affect in a profound way how we interpret the meaning of spoken words. In the production of improvisational text, in scenes in which the eyes are visible to the audience, the words are on a decidedly lower level of the semiotic hierarchy. Even in the scripted drama, where the improvisational contribution of the actor is kept at a minimum and does not concern the constitution of the verbal text itself, the actor can radically alter the meaning of a speech by carefully managing the expressiveness of his eyes. The eyes, says Lang, are a more prominent tool of expression than language, however forceful the style in which the verbal text may have been cast. “Often a wink of the eye at the right moment can prove more significant than a torrent of words” (Lang 1984, p. 118). Externally, the signifying effectiveness of ocular gestures is dependent on precise timing, as are many other aspects of acting; internally, it is subject to the actor’s ability to summon the right emotion from within himself, to the intensity appropriate for the stage. The resulting visual expression will be superimposed on speech with a message compelling enough to render the words barely detectable in the audience’s field of perception.

**Gestural dominance**

The communicative dominance of gestures over speech in all areas of human activity, including the improvised theater, was theorized in the early seventeenth century by Giovanni Bonifacio in a detailed study of the subject titled *De’ Cenni* (1616). In this work, Bonifacio reflects on the signifying potential of gestures, invoking evidence from many fields of scholarship, arguing that gestural communication is indispensable to all professions, because all professions involve social transactions in which the interlocutors need to understand each other fully and without delay. Speech unassisted by the appropriate body language would be both awkward and imprecise. Bonifacio believes that just as words are produced in accordance with rules of order and meaning appropriate to the situation, so must the accompanying gestures, particularly hand movements, be executed in logical combination with words in order to create a signifying structure that includes both. The relationship between language and gesture is very much like the one between music and dancing. If gesture and language are not in tune with each other, they will produce a ludicrous discordance of forms (*una dissonanza piú ridicolosa*), rather like the effect of a dancer who does not move to the rhythm of the music (Bonificio 1616, p. 551). Gestures contribute to the creation of messages what words alone could not possibly do, and at times they can reveal thoughts that words may try to conceal. Gestures, moreover, can
impress the audience much more profoundly than words. Their expressive power derives from their direct link to the mind through the agency of the body, while their dominance in perception comes from the fact that human beings respond more receptively to visual stimuli, “quelle cose che vediamo,” than to aural stimuli, “quelle cose che ascoltiamo” (Bonifacio 1616, p. 551). It is unfortunate that the art of gesturing is not part of training programs for litigation lawyers, for through a skilled use of gesturing, they could lend their arguments the persuasive power that language alone cannot give them when they improvise their speeches in court.

The only profession that seems to have mastered the art of gesturing is that of the actor. Audiences, Bonifacio claims, are engrossed by the gestures that they see rather than the words that they hear in a performance. We know that the stories presented by actors on stage are frequently unappealing works of fiction. In some cases, we would surely lack the patience to read them as written texts, and yet we are delighted to hear and watch them in performance. Actors have the power to move the audience to tears or laughter by means of a composite performance language, visual and linguistic at the same time (Bonifacio 1616, p. 549). In the semantic structure of the performance text, the visual and linguistic forms are most frequently aimed at the expression of the same significandum, but gestures can also be employed to undermine the signifying goal of the words, leaving the audience with the opposite meaning. In such cases, the performance text has a dialectical semantic structure.

The principle involved in the creation of such a signifying structure by means of gestures is very important in itself and highly significant for the improvisational theater. Bonifacio observes: “accomodandosi col gesto tutto il contrario di quello che con la voce si pronontia, si vuole che gli ascoltatori credano al gesto e non alla voce” (Bonifacio 1616, p. 552), which is to say, when gestures are used to establish the opposite message, the objective of the performers is to induce the audience to believe the message embodied in the gesture rather than the one expressed by the words. Bonifacio observes that this is the basis of the rhetorical figure of irony, which we use when we want the audience to understand the opposite of what we actually say. By simple extension, Bonifacio implies that all rhetorical figures that have a pragmatic function are gestural embodiments of intention, whether the gesture is vocal, physical, or both.

The relevance of this principle to the improvisational theater could not be overstated, for the rhetorical use of gestures affords the actors a considerable measure of dramaturgical control of the audience’s perception of the performance. It also illustrates the creative role of the performer even in cases when it may be possible to argue that the text of simple speeches is the fruit of memory rather than improvisation. The performative mode will cast an entirely different light on the words. The principle delineated by Bonifacio also
implies that if the text is assigned to one actor and the rhetorical gesture to another, the performance itself, and not simply the sign, will have a dialectical structure and an ensemble authorship. In effect, Bonifacio’s principle for the construction of meaning in performance suggests that in the improvised visual–verbal text, the audience will automatically subject what they hear to what they see, for it is the visual sign, not the verbal one, that dominates their field of perception. At times, the dominance is such as to silence the aural code completely. Lorenzo Magalotti makes a fine observation in this regard in a work from the early eighteenth century. There are times, he says, when words are of no help at all and all communication must be gestural. When they fall prey to vehement passions, people feel the urgency to express themselves and yet are unable to speak. At such times, language is entirely useless to them, and they have immediate recourse to hand, facial, and inarticulate vocal gestures, all of which are very eloquent tools of emotional expression. To become incapable of speech does not mean to cease being capable of communication. Speech presupposes a degree of composure that gestures do not. It is only after crossing the threshold of calmness that speech can once again become a means of communication. Hand movements, facial gestures, a twisting of the neck, a rolling of the eyes, inarticulate sounds, shrieking and yelling—these are all physical words as far as Magalotti is concerned. They are made available to us directly by nature, and we discover their semiotic potential as soon as the need arises. People who live with such a need, those who were born mute or who have lost the power of speech, have a greater appreciation of the natural availability of gestural signs. They live in a world of visual signs, and the need to communicate with others forces them to learn how to use their fingers as speaking tongues, *linguosis digitis*, observes Magalotti, using a well-known classical formula for speech by hand gestures. Necessity is indeed a great teacher of languages, “una gran maestra di lingue” (Magalotti 1734, p. 280).

When they are handled by accomplished actors, such gestural languages, we may add, are readily understood and much appreciated by theater audiences. The late-Renaissance scholar Fynes Moryson reported that English players touring Germany were enormously successful precisely because of their gestural language. In Frankfurt, “both men and women, flocked to see their gesture and action, rather than heare them, speaking English which they understand not” (cited in Meagher 2003, p. 153). In the commedia dell’arte tradition, a highly distinguished testimony of the same principle comes to us from Luigi Riccoboni, better known by his *nom de scène* Lelio. Referring to about 30 years of experience in France, Riccoboni confirms that in that country he frequently performed his commedia role with an abundance of gestures to make up for his imperfect French. In the proem to a scenario in which the action involves a character who pretends to be mute, *Il muto per spavento*, Riccoboni recalls that, when his company started to perform in France, the
audience responded with enthusiasm to their gestural communication. At that time, neither Riccoboni nor his fellow actors could perform in French. The audience’s appreciation of gestures soon became so obvious to them that on occasion they would incorporate into their scenarios brief episodes with a mute servant. In such episodes, we may observe, they isolated gestures from speech and could observe their effectiveness in what we might call laboratory conditions. *Il muto per spavento* takes this motif to center stage, making it the source of the dramatic action. The play was a huge success because the French members of the audience who were insufficiently familiar with the Italian vernaculars spoken by the actors could nonetheless grasp perfectly the gestural signs of the mute character, “intendevano perfettamente il linguaggio delle mani e de’ gesti del muto” (Riccoboni 1973, p. 84). Riccoboni is in total agreement with Magalotti on the eloquence of human hands.

Riccoboni’s analysis of his success goes a long way to explaining the success of commedia dell’arte companies in other countries and even in regions of Italy linguistically remote from the vernaculars spoken by the actors. Gestures are by no means universal, but there is much in them that is multi-national, particularly in the indication of visible referents, the imitation of common actions, and the expression of emotions, in all of which conventions tend to play a minimal role. Dramatic language unassisted by gesture is unintelligible and inartistic to foreign audiences, but when it is used collaboratively with transcultural gestures, as it was by Riccoboni’s company, both the meaning and the aesthetic merit of the improvised dialogue can come through to the audience with relative ease. In such compound acts of semiosis, there are two basic strategies. In the first place, gestures can be used by one actor co-expressively with the words spoken by another in an act of performance designed to convey a single and indivisible unit of meaning in the development of dialogue. In the second place, gestures can be used by one actor to elicit their lexical affiliates from his dialogue partner, that is to say, the words that can articulate vocally what has just been expressed visually, in a composite act of forward-looking gestural anticipation and backward-looking verbal hermeneutics. In both semiotic strategies, intelligibility and aesthetic purport depend on congruity, which is a function of perfect timing. For each segment of composite performance text, the asynchrony between gesture and speech is the originary locus of both narrative meaning and aesthetic sense.

**Pantomime**

The most rewarding genre in which to study stage gesturing in the improvisation of performance text, however, is pantomime. This is a form of
theater in which the only signs employed in the construction of performance consist of movement, normally without the aid of stage properties and never with the accompaniment of language. The performers wear costumes, of course, and operate within a set, and these contribute to the determination of sense, but they do so in the manner of additive constants, since the costume and set codes are not normally subject to alteration by the performers in their improvisation of text. In pantomime, improvisation concerns only the guidelines in the scenario, the dynamics of gesturing, and the geometric exactness of the poses. In the staging process, the literary scenario, which may or may not contain dialogue, is recoded into sequences of brief scenes that can be interpreted literally and performed as dumb show, without the aid of language or properties. Recoding may be best understood as an act of translation, in which a work written in the literary code is rendered in the code of expressive movement. Since prose and verse do not have exact equivalents in gestures and actions, in recoding there is a significant role for improvisation, as ingenuity and creativity both come into play when, just prior to performance, scripted sentences must be reconceived as expressions of physical language. Many words cannot be recoded at all, and so the passages in which they occur must be cut and the meaning somehow rendered without them. For example, nouns designating colors, intervals of time, and abstract entities, as well adjectives and adverbs derived from them cannot be expressed in physical language, nor can verbal tenses and moods be physically distinguished from one another. Once the recoding has occurred, improvisation concerns the development of the individual sequences of the performance text directly on stage, presenting them as an assemblage of visual signs. The purpose of the original scenario is to enable the actor to understand his character and to grasp the motivation of his actions. The purpose of the recoded scenario is to enable him to grasp the nature of the actions and their sequential logic as a basis for their improvisation of the performance text in all of its particulars.

We can get a good sense of what is involved in pantomimic improvisation by examining Charles Aubert’s recoding of a brief scene in Molière’s *Tartuffe ou l’imposteur*, in which the protagonist asks Dorine, who is wearing a dress with a very low neckline, to cover her bosom because it causes lustful impulses in his soul:

> Couvrez ce sein, que je ne saurais voir.
> Par de pareils objets les âmes sont blessées,
> Et cela fait venir de coupables pensées. (III.2, lines 860–62)

When it is seen on stage enacted by a pantomime, this brief speech would appear as a sequence of six body actions and facial gestures (Aubert 2003, p. 186). Standing at a comfortable distance from Dorine, enough for him
to extend his arms without touching her and yet close enough to point to her bosom with his gaze without ambiguity, Tartuffe makes the following gestures: 1) cover, 2) your bosom, 3) my eyes turn away, 4) my hands push back, 5) these objects, 6) me scandalize. The six signifying actions into which Aubert translated Tartuffe’s speech can be conveniently grouped into four kinematic phrases, each ending with the body in a distinct pose, since the first two can be easily performed and perceived as a single uninterrupted segment of physical speech, as can the last two. The first phrase is articulated as a sequence of three actions: the pronoun “you” as the subject of the imperative verb, the act of covering that the verb designates, and your bosom. In the physical language of pantomime, all pronouns, including the unspoken subjects of imperatives and possessives adjectives, are encoded as simple hand gestures of pointing, which is to say as unambiguous indexical signs. All action verbs are expressed as imitative actions or kinematic iconic signs, irrespective of mood, tense, and person. Nouns that designate referents visible on stage are encoded as if they were third person pronouns, that is, by simple indication. In the narrative, Tartuffe conveys his thought by three simple actions: pointing, covering, and pointing again, the latter in the pose of gazing at Dorine’s bosom. In the performance text, the actor impersonating Tartuffe can execute each of these actions in a variety of ways, since throughout the phrase he has total control of the design, rhythm, and flow of the signifying dynamics of his body. He also has control of the facial expression that must accompany his gesture in order to convey the temptation of the character. The general mark of temptation is desire to possess, a sentiment that is facially encoded as a backward tilting of the head, raised and contracted eyebrows, and partly open lips advancing toward the object craved by the character, all collaborating in the creation of an indexical sign of his interior state of being manifested on his face and in his pose.

The second kinematic phrase describes the character attempting to remove himself from the sphere of temptation, performing a facial gesture of mistrust and suspicion. The expression of the state of mind articulated as a display of uneasiness about trusting something that is too appealing may be encoded as a contraction of the face with raised cheeks and slightly closed eyes turning away from the object, while the act of protection from further fascination entails raising close to the heart a hand with the palm facing outward and throwing the weight of the body backward onto the supporting leg (Aubert 2003, p. 106). The sign is very complex and may be performed in several more or less elegant variations without damage to its signifying structure. The movement of the eyes and face is indexical of the contrasting sentiments of mistrust and fascination that govern the psychology of the character, while the raised palm and the backward tilt of the body are symbolic of the separation that the defensive screen of a handkerchief is
meant to erect between him and the source of his temptation. The pose in which the actor finds himself at the end of the phrase displays the intended meaning as the synthetic result of various signifiers operating in unison.

The third phrase derives from the awareness that the gestures of self-protection performed so far and signified by the last pose may not be sufficient. The character therefore mounts an active defense, devising other ways of resisting his lustful thoughts. The actor achieves this effect by transforming the pose of the previous phrase into one of active defense. Whereas in executing the second phrase, he retreated from the source of the character’s destructive fascination, in performing the third phrase he advances toward it in order to force it back. The kinematic equivalent of the act of negation that is implicit in rejection is a posture in which the performer, tilting his body backward by bending his supporting leg, extends both hands forward with open palms pointing upward, and pushing against the air that separates him from the source of danger, as if to force it to retreat. The ending pose of this phrase is a powerful sign at once indexical of Tartuffe’s desire to protect himself and symbolic of the power of the erotic force that he has to repeal. The final message of Tartuffe’s actions in this phrase of the scene’s dynamics is that he pretends to imagine her pursuing his feigned innocence with the erotic aggressiveness of her breasts.

In the fourth kinematic phrase, we are able to observe the semiotic process at a higher level of sophistication. Although all nouns designating visible objects are reducible to pronouns and encoded as indicative gestures, the reference to Dorine’s breasts, called objects, is thematically so focused as to call for the performance of the first action of the phrase as a prolonged and variegated indicative gesture, accompanied by a facial expression designed to guide the audience’s own gaze and to convey to them something of Tartuffe’s titillation. The objects that are said to offend the soul of the character presumably must be envisioned in all their power to offend, which is why the beginning of this phrase represents a refined moment of dramatic prurience for both the character and the audience. The audience’s participation in Tartuffe’s lubricious imaginings comes to an end with the onset of the next action of the phrase, in which Tartuffe gesturally declares that he is offended by the sight of Dorine’s bosom. The imaginary violation of the laws of basic norms of social decency that may be caused by Dorine’s lack of restraint provokes in Tartuffe—so he claims—a profound sense of horror, and he is scandalized. Two gestures are involved: the pronominal one of self-indication, and the verbal one of being scandalized. Unlike action verbs, which are encoded iconically as simulated actions, reproducing the planned and voluntary motions involved in their real referents, expressive verbs require a different approach. Since in real life they involve involuntary motions that produce spontaneous configurations of the face and movements of the body, in the improvisation of pantomimic text,
they are not visualized as simulated actions in the process of being enacted, but as finished actions recognizable from the feelings to which they give rise. In Aubert’s rendition of Tartuffe, the syntactical order of the words in “me scandalize” is meant to suggest the translation of the action into an expression, as if the direct object pronoun “me” were the subject. “Me scandalize” is automatically recoded as “I express-the-emotion-of-scandalization,” in which the hyphenated verbal phrase is conceived as a single expressive verb, and performed as a gestural embodiment of that emotion. Expressive verbs and verbal phrases are encoded as the nouns that designate the sentiments with which they are associated. The verb “to scandalize” raises expectations of emotional states that can range all the way from simple astonishment to profound horror, depending on the perceived gravity of the moral offence in question. Thus, to be scandalized can be encoded as the expression of any of these feelings. The actor must choose which emotion to perform, and his choice represents his creative contribution as an interpretative artist to the composition of the performance text. The physical signs available to him display the same basic structure, but they are extensive in number and varied in form. They all involve partly opening the mouth, as if to exclaim the crescendo of indignation presupposed by the emotional states related to the verb, simultaneously contracting the facial muscles to draw the eyebrows together as well as downward while trying to look upward, in order to signify with the resulting vertical wrinkles on the forehead the desire to degrade the object of temptation and to call the wrath of heaven upon it (cf Aubert 2003, p. 110).

In the performance of Tartuffe’s famous scene with Dorine, as in all pantomimic drama, the physical signs must be precise. In this context, precision should not be mistaken for realism, not even in the performance of actions mimetically based on real ones. Precise pantomimic motion displays an exactness of line and detail that tends more toward stylization than realism. It is an act of clean semiosis, consciously divested of the unintentional clutter that normally accompanies gestural signifiers in real-life communication, and it is semantically complete in itself, requiring neither language nor properties. In the pantomimic code, gestures are neat and amplified signs, whose meaning must be clear and whose design must be aesthetically pleasing. Yet the pantomimic vocabulary, expressive though it is, is considerably less extensive than that of verbal languages. We have already mentioned the types of verbal expressions for which there is no gestural equivalent, and we have discussed polysemy as the semantic principle at the core of many others. In general, the common vocabulary of body language is not univocal. For example, the posture in which a performer throws his weight onto his backward leg while raising his opposite hand to the level of his face with the palm oriented outward can be used to signify twelve passive sensations, as
different as ignorance and terror (Aubert 2003, p. 19). The performer must choose the appropriate postural design and render it in combination with the facial gesture, so that the combination will leave no doubt concerning the intended meaning of the movement and its aesthetic purport. Neatness of design, exactness of expressive detail, and precision in timing and duration are the fundamental parameters of improvised pantomimic text.

**Simultaneity**

The study of pantomime gives a good idea of the power of gesture to express feelings and to advance the plot. It now remains for us to consider encoding at a higher level of complexity. First, when the language of one actor is concomitant with the gestural expression of another, and second, when the same actor, in a virtuosic display of skill, plays several characters, using visual as well as aural codes, including intelligible speech, phonic gestures or inarticulate speech, and physical gestures in the quick dynamic of improvisation. In such multicode situations, the position of semiotic dominance can shift unexpectedly from one code to the other.

In the improvisation of commedia loquaciousness, normally dominated by the Dottore—whose main distinctive feature as a character is his propensity for a clever yet ludicrous use of language without interruption for an extended period of time—the visual code usually plays a subsidiary and complementary role. It may be employed by the other performers on stage either to reinforce what is said by the actor improvising verbal *lazzi* in the role of the Dottore or to try to stop him from going on and on. In scenes of acrobatic movement, or scenes of slapstick, horseplay and unnatural contortions of the body, the order of dominance is generally the reverse, speech playing the supporting rather than the leading role. The possibility of a rapid alteration of the hierarchy of codes in moving from one episode to the next is a distinctive feature of commedia dell’arte. It is generated by the genre’s preference for a fast dramatic tempo and by its declared distance from the poetics of verisimilitude.

In the audience’s field of perception, through which the performance text flows in its semiotic unity, the simultaneous interplay of codes plays a hugely significant role. The audience may be witnessing gestural signs by an actor slightly upstage of, and hence unseen by, the actors in the roles of Dottore or Arlecchino, designed to deride their virtuosity. The audience may also be witnessing the emergence of a collusive understanding between characters in situations fraught with possibilities of comic catastrophe. In such scenes, the segment of performance text received by the audience is the result of the collaborative efforts of the actors to create a single message
and to give rise to one aesthetic experience. In that experience, the role of gestures unseen by the character at center stage is as significant as the role of the Dottore’s language and Arlecchino’s antics because the object of the audience’s perception is generated by both codes in simultaneous operation.

Unless distraction gets in the way, in the theater the audience automatically moves into a simultaneous perception mode. This is possible because the stage is a frame for performance texts whose primary dimension is visual, and visual forms impose on the audience a holistic mode of perception. Their communicative capacity is a function of the simultaneous presence of interconnected components. Simultaneity is the organizing principle of all visual signs (Jakobson 1964, p. 219), which is why “the relations determining a visual structure are grasped in a single act of vision” (Langer 1951, p. 86). Theatrical signs are visual all of the time, visual and verbal much of the time, and almost never only verbal. We can distinguish two types: solo and ensemble performances. In solo performances, the internal relations of an elementary segment of performance text involve the simultaneity of word, gesture, and movement as performed by the same actor, normally as encodings of the same message. In a solo performance, such as a monologue lazzo, the audience observes various codes operating in a logic of reciprocal integration and perceives meaning only as resulting from their interaction.

In the modern period, the great master of this type of improvisation in the commedia dell’arte tradition is Dario Fo in his performance of extended lazzi spoken in grammelot and played with pantomimic actions of all kinds. Grammelot is a mélange of onomatopoeic sounds and other phonic gestures that simulate real words and phrases but are mostly meaningless in themselves, though in performance “they contrive to indicate the meaning of the situation” (Fo 1991, p. 43). In one of his most famous monologues, the story of the starving Zanni, he makes use of much grammelot, comparatively little intelligible speech, and a whirlwind of complex body movements to tell the story of a Zanni who is so hungry that he imagines eating everything, including the audience and his own body. The audience would not be able to find any part of this monologue as a meaningful section of the narrative if it were to restrict its field of perception to only one of the codes employed by Dario Fo, reading it as if it were a link in the chain of linear text produced by that code alone. None of the codes operating by itself tells the story, the monologue having been designed so that body movements, hand gestures, grunts, speech, and grammelot might all contribute in different measure but in an equally essential way to the creation of meaning, not serially but simultaneously within the parameters of physical possibility—grunts and speech can be produced quasi-simultaneously but not simultaneously, whereas either could be simultaneous with hand gestures and body movement.
With a skillful use of physical language, the performer of a monologue can exercise significant control over the parameters that delimit the audience’s grasp of the performance text. Understood in visual terms, these parameters are the amplitude and focus of the audience’s field of cognitive and aesthetic perception. Dario Fo, who is a great master of the techniques involved in the dramaturgical management of the audience’s grasp of improvised performance text, illustrates with great precision the significance of such control in the audience’s grasp of such a complex performance text as his own narrative of *The Starving Zanni*. When he begins to perform the story of the Zanni’s dream of an imminent repast, speaking Grammelot he performs a few grand arm gestures and body movements that signify by spatial projection the magnitude of the Zanni’s hunger. By doing so, however, he carves out around himself a space that marks the outer limits of the audience’s field of perception, an area onto which to concentrate their attention for the interpretation and appreciation of the performance text that is about to unfold. Fo then freezes the lower half of his body into motionlessness, limiting his physical vocabulary to movements that he can perform with his arms and upper frame. This self-imposed limitation on the repertory of signs available for performance restricts the audience’s field of vision to a smaller section of the performance space. At that point, he begins to make expressive movements with his arms, all within a distance of about 30 cm from the center of his face. The effect of this operation is to reduce the audience’s field of perception to the immediate space around his head and to limit their focus to the signifying purport of his hands moving in counterpoint with the expressive actions of his face, including those he makes with his lips as he utters phonic gestures and speaks intelligible words, the whole passing in the audience’s field of vision as a multilayered flux of improvised performance text. The crucial point is to persuade the audience “to focus on one detail of the action, or on the totality of the action” as if by controlling a filtering mechanism in their brain (Fo 1991, p. 45). In a subsequent scene of even greater dramaturgical precision, Fo makes the buzzing noise of a flying insect with his lips while with his eyes he pretends to follow the erratic trajectory of an imaginary fly moving within his performance space. In this manner, he provides the audience’s field of perception with a moving focal point, only to make it come to a sudden halt, effectively concentrating all of the audience’s attention onto it. At that point, the Zanni is able to catch it, dismember it with his fingers, and devour its tiny parts with great relish. Without such careful management of the audience’s parameters of perception, the performance text would lack cognitive as well as aesthetic clarity.

Monologues become more complex, of course, if the actor is required to play more than one character, adjusting his visual and auditory performance accordingly, in accordance with their uniqueness. A very interesting example
of this type of monologue is *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, the story of Jesus appearing before a large medieval crowd gathered in the cemetery to watch him perform his grand miracle. Dario Fo plays a medieval jester who plays several members of the crowd witnessing the arrival of Jesus on location. In his improvisation, Dario Fo made use of all the codes just mentioned, the prepared verbal text serving him only as a matrix for the production of the performance text. Much of the text is a description of the gestures that he performed as he pronounced the words. Consider the following passage, in which the actor performs eight different characters in quick succession:

“Goodness me! Look... There's Jesus! Look how young he is. Doesn't even have a beard! Just a boy. Looks very nice. He’s quite small, and very young.” (Breath.) “I expected him to be much bigger, with long hair!” (Describes with a rapid series of gestures.) “I thought he'd have had piercing eyes, big teeth and hands so that when he gave a blessing...” (As though wielding a sword.) “Whack! Whack! He'd have cut the faithful in two.” (Further change of tone.) “This one's too small, too gentle.” (Loud roar, almost on the verge of hysteria.) “JESUS!! JESUS!! How about repeating the miracle of the loaves and fishes? They were great.” (Waving his arms in the air.) “What a feast we had that day!” (Leans on the other leg and glances over his shoulder.) “Do you think of nothing except stuffing your belly? Blasphemous pig!” (Change of tone and attitude.) “Look at him! What a wonderful man he is!” (Fo 1991, p. 102)

The jester looks at the miracles of Jesus from the perspective of uneducated peasants, whose ideas of history do not go further than living memory, who know nothing of theology, who live a life of hardship, for whom miracles make sense as the works of a powerful miracle worker, loving and good, and capable of representing before their very eyes a dream of liberation. Though it represents a continuous flow of performance text, the monologue can be subdivided into eight brief units of performance text, one for each character-speech. The passage gives a very good idea of the emotions that must accompany the words spoken by the different characters, which range from pleasant surprise at seeing Jesus's age to indignation toward an irreverent member of the crowd. Three of the bracketed stage directions describe imitative hand and body movements, to be performed simultaneously with the speeches to which they refer and executed to show how two characters visualize Jesus and how a third character would like to see him bless the faithful. Two other stage directions refer to sudden changes in voice modulation, and one describes the action that the actor has to perform as the character who turns over his shoulder to yell at another person in the crowd.
It is clear from this description that each segment of the monologue is internally organized by the principle of simultaneity. Each section of the performance text is encoded using speech (text), vocal gesture (tone), expressive gestures (emotions), and pantomimic movement (actions), all in synchronous operation and all engaged in the collaborative creation of the same narrative. The nonverbal codes have a signifying function that cannot escape the notice of the audience, particularly in monologues, for in such scenes gestures tend to be more emphatic and less subtle than in scenes with more than one character. Dialogue attenuates individual gestural expressiveness precisely because there are two performers contributing verbally and nonverbally to the creation of the performance text. In monologues, gestures are generally more pronounced, more numerous and reiterated, and all movements of limbs and body have greater amplitude. In an overtly physical genre like the commedia dell’arte, a monologue is an opportunity for virtuosic display of inventiveness, gestural talent, and acrobatic skill. A monologue such as Dario Fo’s *The Starving Zanni* is certainly less memorable for the story that it tells than it is for Dario Fo’s performance of it, as is the monologue on *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, which is one of his virtuoso pieces.

Ultimately, the significance of the message produced by one of the codes available to the improvising actor is conditioned by the concomitant operation of the others and by the shifting location of the semiotic focus of the performance text. The message generated by a given code is always partial, the full message resulting from the interaction among the codes. That interaction appears in its simultaneous totality in the field of perception of the audience and not in that of the individual performers. Events taking place anywhere onstage within the same unit of performance duration can have no independent meaning for the audience, who see them all in synchrony. Such synchrony is more difficult to conceive if we consider individual scenes from the perspective of their production rather than their reception, following the logic of the scenario. We thus run the risk of privileging the discursive linearity of the scenario at the expense of the visual depth and amplitude of its semiotic configuration. We may be tempted to let the action of the dominant character guide us in our interpretation, privileging the signifying function of the actor entrusted with carrying forward that particular segment of the scenario. The fallacy involved in this mode of reasoning is that at every moment of its flow, the artistic and cognitive totality of the performance text has no existence other than as a collective goal, like the music performed by an ensemble of musicians, each playing a separate part of the score. Only the audience, in whose field of perception it flows as a lived experience, can grasp the improvised performance text in its semiotic complexity and in its aesthetic texture.
In the third act of Goldoni’s *Servant of Two Masters*, there is a delightful scene in which Truffaldino, in a subtle game of ontological reciprocity, mimics the commedia dell’arte actor impersonating his role. Having placed Florindo’s portrait in the wrong trunk, he now has to explain how it got there, and how he came into possession of it in the first place. Caught off-guard, Truffaldino quickly provides Florindo with a series of false but entirely credible answers, adding one lie to the other, and in the process improvising a story that explains how the portrait ended up in that particular trunk. After inventing the turning point of the story, which is the death of his previous master, Truffaldino turns to the audience with a comment on his own improvisation process: “Digo quel che me vien alla bocca”—I say whatever comes to my lips (Goldoni 1959, IV, p. 63). Truffaldino’s aside is a Venetian translation of an aphorism authored by Cicero, *quidquid in buccam venit*, in a letter to Atticus (*Ad Atticum*, 1.12) and later used by many authors throughout the Classical tradition to describe the initial stage of the writing process, before the text could become the object of reflection and revision. By the end of the seventeenth century, the aphorism was in the public domain as a commonplace for improvised composition. In his famous study of improvisation in the commedia dell’arte, *A Treatise on Acting from Memory and by Improvisation* (1699), Andrea Perrucci cites it to observe that only accomplished actors should try to improvise a performance text, inventing the details as they go along. Everyone else is likely to fail (Perrucci 2008, p. 101).

The *Servant of Two Masters* had been written as a scenario in 1745 for the company of Antonio Sacchi for a production with Sacchi in the role of Truffaldino. This was a highly successful company, and Antonio Sacchi was
himself an actor of great distinction, easily a star of the first magnitude in the improvisational tradition. As Goldoni recalls in a passage of his *Memoires*, Sacchi could be exceedingly impressive as an improviser (Goldoni 1814, I, p. 281). The company’s production of his scenario was so successful that Goldoni later wrote out the play in full, trying to recapture in his script the performance text improvised by the actors. He must also have been especially amused by Sacchi’s appropriation of the Ciceronian aphorism, and so he included it in his final version of the text. By saying “Digo quel che me vien alla bocca,” Antonio Sacchi was describing to the audience his own brilliant performance through the agency of the fictional character in whose role he had cast himself. On the metatheatrical level of the scene of the portrait, Sacchi gives Truffaldino a special twist, momentarily enabling him to speak like Sacchi himself, going as far as to cite, with the nonchalance of a seasoned actor, an aphorism from dramatic theory that describes precisely what Sacchi was doing on stage. Thus, *The Servant of Two Masters* incorporates an actor’s allusion to himself as an improviser and situates the play in the great tradition of the art of stage improvisation.

We should not be misled by Truffaldino’s nonchalance into assuming that an actor who speaks *quidquid in buccam venit* has an easy time of it. The nonchalance is feigned in the fiction of the story and not in its metatheatrical allusion to the improvising process. That Antonio Sacchi could make improvisation appear like an effortless exercise does not mean that the craft could be mastered without effort by the average actor, nor does it imply that the semiotic process that it entails in the composition process is easy to put into sharp focus. Misrepresentations of the nature of improvisation abound in the scholarship on the commedia dell’arte tradition. The conceptual content of the term itself remains susceptible of elucidation. Modern scholarship in its *pars destruens* has done much to correct various misconceptions, which had been generated by amateurish approaches to the subject and by the easy approximations of popularizing accounts, but in its *pars construens*, it has not yet determined the precise form of improvisation and has not yet seriously broached the question whether this notion in the theory of the commedia dell’arte is a special case of a more general idea of improvisation, equally applicable to diverse art forms, such as other types of comedy and buffoonery, lyric poetry, mime and music. The latter and more ambitious task, however, cannot be fruitfully undertaken until the question of the form of improvisation has been adequately answered, since it is clearly on the level of form alone that the theoretical implications of analogy among heterogeneous art objects can be pursued with any degree of rigor.

This chapter is an attempt to formalize the notion of improvisation in the commedia dell’arte tradition and to describe its distinctive features without making substantive references to the factual content of specific realizations.
in practice. It is convenient to distinguish between generalization and formalization as processes that can be followed in the pursuit of analysis. The significance of such a distinction is central to the phenomenological approach, as explained by Husserl himself in Ideas (Husserl 1962, parag. 13). Briefly stated, generalization is a logical movement from species to genus, and hence from the genus thus reached to a more inclusive one, of which it can be regarded as a species. Generalization takes us from a specific category to a more inclusive one, as when we say that the type of improvisation allowed within a fully scripted play is a species of the kind possible in a partly scripted play, which is itself a species of the improvisation of a totally unscripted play for which we have only the scenario. Formalization, on the other hand, is a logical movement from concrete phenomena to their abstract form by means of a progressive removal of the material specificity of the phenomena, as when we say that, when it is divested of the empirical specificity imparted to it by a given company, commedia improvisation is a creative process based on the unscripted use of previously acquired materials, within the boundaries of a scenario and in accordance with a principle of composition appropriate to the genre. Formalization is the replacement of the common sense description of this phenomenon, which is too open to subjective input, with a set of clearly definable parameters and with a law of association that relates them to one another and organizes them into a coherent whole. This in effect means circumscribing the notion's formal aspects and ridding them of all accidental reference to actual content, since such references would anchor our understanding to specific cases of stage improvisation and ultimately invalidate any claim to exactness, for the result of a formalization process is an exact model of the phenomenon. Generalization is the inclusion of a specific type of phenomenon into a more inclusive type; formalization is the elimination of all the concrete substance of a phenomenon so that it can be reduced to the abstract semiotic structure we may call its form. One of the purposes of this chapter is to discover the compositional principle that governs the syntactical form of improvisation in direct performance.

**Improvisation as composition**

A good starting point for such a formalization is the well-known fact that improvisation is a text-building process in which the rehandling of known materials is as far from the recitation of a fixed script as it is from spontaneous creativity *ex nihilo*. As we have already seen, improvisation on the commedia dell’arte stage entails intimate collaboration among the cast for the purpose of conjoining signs drawn from the repertoires of individual actors and harmonized into a plot-articulating strategy. It is, in other words, a process of
composition—aiming, that is, at the formation of composite semiotic units by the addition of discrete parts. This means that improvisation is not a self-contained notion but a relational concept. It involves at least two variables, which it grafts onto one another in the formation of stimulus-and-response units of communication: given the stimulus produced by one character, the process of improvisation must determine the textually appropriate response of his interlocutor, which is then regarded as another stimulus, itself awaiting a response in the evolving performance text.

The composite units formed in this process need not include a verbal component for both characters involved in the exchange. In the commedia dell’arte of the seventeenth century, the Dottore frequently embarked on verbal lazzi of inordinate length—Perrucci quotes one that is twelve pages long—performed with an uninterrupted chain of supporting gestures, so much so that in the early eighteenth century, Pier Jacopo Martello, a literary playwright of distinction and a keen observer of commercial theatrical practice from a literary perspective—could disapprovingly characterize the Dottore’s communicative style as gesteggiata loquacità or gestured loquaciousness (Martello 1723, p. 158). The actor impersonating the other character on stage was expected to respond to the Dottore’s tirade with appropriate gestures, both physical and vocal, but without causing an interruption. Only bad actors, Goldoni observes in The Comic Theatre (1750), stand there like a statue or let their eyes wander during the speech delivered by another actor. The gestural response of the actor and the verbal-gestural one of the Dottore thereby form composite units of performance text for the audience to perceive in a single act of simultaneous perception. The performance text speaks to the audience about both characters, though only one is involved in creating a speech.

The Dottore’s verbal tirades were constructed as interminable sentences consisting of very simple phrases and clauses linked together by superficial associations and sprinkled with short quotations in Latin. If at a basic functional level, a phrase consists of a noun and a qualifier, as in the name of an individual and his geographical origin, the linking occurs by the mechanical association generated by the model, while the buildup assumes the form of a simple enumeration. Thus, in the Dottore’s tirade on a jousting competition, the pattern is set by the lady whose wedding is celebrated by the knights, *Iren imperadriz de Costantinopol*, and is then followed by a long list of such apppellations, involving characters both historical and literary, distorting the pronunciation just enough to leave the audience the ability to recognize the distortion. The operation with clauses follows the same process of paradigmatic and syntagmatic construction in which the replacement is also motivated by an uncomplicated chain of ideas and images. In a famous episode (Perrucci 2008, p. 137), the Dottore pretends to trip as he enters from the wings, and after observing that, if he had fallen, he would have surely required medications for
his injury, he goes on to say that medicines are made with spices that come from the East, adding that, according to Aristotle, the winds also come from the East, that Aristotle was tutor to Alexander the Great, that the latter became master of the world, that Atlas holds up the world on his shoulders, and so on at some length, overlaying the predicate position of a clause with the subject position of the following one. By the use of so simple a mechanism for phrase construction and for the syntactical colligation of clauses, the actor playing the Dottore was able to go on uninterruptedly for some time, modulating the string of silliness with emotionally expressive gestures, preventing his interlocutor from proceeding beyond the effort to insert a sign of his own. A relatively simple variation of this process consisted in replacing nouns with phrases, and then developing the sentence by using the attribute rather than the noun as the link to the next clause, thereby turning the linear development of the sentence into a complex imbrication of semantic fields, suggesting different hermeneutical directions that led absolutely nowhere.

The equivalent of this performance operation in the philosophical culture of the time was the psychology of the mechanical association of ideas, which in David Hartley’s famous formulation in his Observations on Man (1749) was governed by principles analogous to the principles of Newtonian mechanics. The mind brought words and ideas into association mechanically by similarity, contiguity, and contrast. The improvised tirades of the Dottore followed analogous rules of construction. Each clause led to the next in the compilation of lists by detailed enumeration. Toward the end of the commedia dell’arte tradition, the process is satirized in Leporello’s famous catalogue aria in Don Giovanni, an opera that had enjoyed much good fortune as a commedia dell’arte scenario (Il convitato di pietra) throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Within each phrase and clause, the actor in the role of the Dottore could employ a number of different techniques. Chief among these were distorting words, assigning incongruent attributes, making senseless inferences, and reiterating tautologies as if expressions of serious thinking. In the seventeenth century, before the rehabilitation of academic culture by the early Enlightenment, the Dottore was frequently caused to satirize himself by using a vulgar version of paranomasia in his key statements. Paranomasia is a rhetorical figure that can be used to generate malapropisms of all kinds; when it is coupled with scatology, it can debase the highest form of communication down to an instance of plebeian vulgarity. An example frequently used by the Dottore in the early stages of the commedia dell’arte is the transmutation of the tribunal of judges into the terribil orinal (terrible chamber pot) of the court (Perrucci 2008, p. 134). The pronunciation of this phrase by the Dottore in combination with his interlocutor’s response would constitute a brief segment of text rich with possibilities of comic development. From a narrative
perspective, the segment of performance text perceived by the audience consists of the superimposition of incongruous isotopies (court and toilet) onto the same semantic root (legal proceedings), a sign meant as “tribunal” by the character but pronounced as “terrible urinal” by the performer and received as such by the other performer on stage, who may have perhaps accompanied the word with gestures ranging from the merely suggestive to the outright vulgar.

In the context of such plot situations, it is significant that contemporary theorists of the stage—as if to stress the stimulus-response nature of all textual segments and the discreteness of their components—forbid an actor to speak at the same time as another and to leave the performance space before his interlocutor has finished his response, since in the first case, overlapping would render both utterances unintelligible, and in the second case the absence of the stimulus-emitting actor would cause a loss of continuity and consequently of textual coherence. Overlapping can only be produced by different codes—speech and gesture. It seems, in other words, that improvisation is a compositional function that, upon application to an actor’s communicational stimulus, assigns to it a sequel from the repertoire of the other actor on stage, in such a manner that the formation of stimulus-response composite units of communication has the intrinsic goal of contributing to the development of the performance text and the extrinsic one of immediately gratifying the audience.

The syntax of the resulting performance text can be fruitfully analyzed in terms of the changing deictic orientation that accompanies the progression of improvised signs. Deixis is a performance-based semiotic form in which meaningful interpretation can occur only in the presence of the referent, whether it is temporal, spatial, or social. Deictics are literally meant to focus the attention of the spectators onto the material object of the deictic signification, the stuff of the *hic et nunc* of the performance in the playing area of the stage. By carefully controlling their use of deictics, both gestural and verbal, the performers can refocus the attention of the audience onto a different referent, incorporating into the improvised text a manipulative dramaturgy of perception. An elementary syntactical unit of performance text may be defined as the segment of semiotic flux that goes from one deictic marker to the next. It is a unit of uniform deictic orientation of variable length, during which the actors advance the flux and simultaneously manipulate the focus of the audience’s perception, heavily conditioning their response to the narrative syntax. In the course of a particular scene, or even in a single speech, the deictic orientation may vary significantly. For example, in scene 1, 4 of *Flavio’s Fortune* (Scala, scenario 2), there are fourteen deictic changes, while in a long tirade by the Dottore, the deixis may shift many times. The speed with which the deictic orientation is changed without
violating the logic of the action may be regarded as an indication of the skill of the actors involved in the scene.

It is now possible to give a formal account of the evolving performance text in a segment of uniform deixis. In the case of two characters, the form of the composition process may be easily derived from examples of dialogues reported in contemporary accounts of the commedia dell’arte. Such accounts, however, are deceiving in their apparent simplicity, particularly when the speakers are the lovers, prone to repeat the formulas of courtship, separation, and reunion in the flowery Italian of the Petrarchan tradition. The improvisation is not as mechanical as the printed page may lead us to believe, entailing as it normally does subtle voice modulation and virtuosic control of body language. Without such emphasis on the extra-verbal aspects of the performance text, the actors would easily get tired, not having, as other characters do, any special *lazzi* or antics to capture the attention of the audience.

The dialogues of lovers from the turn of the seventeenth century are especially interesting, because this is the period in which commedia dell’arte had embarked on a project to cross the boundaries of its genre and to stretch its conventions away from the stigma of rustic entertainment. Among the different types of dialogue available for analysis, two are particularly noteworthy: one in which the dialogue mimics opera, and the other in which it takes into account the dynamics of reception preferred by polite society. In the first type, the two characters play equally important roles in the dialogue and take turns in uttering single words or short phrases in parallel sentences, each composed of four or five individual speeches in operatic Italian, interweaving them as in a duet. The Innamorata addresses the laces that bind her soul, asking them to come apart so that she may be loosed; the Innamorato addresses the chains that constrain his heart, asking them to break asunder so that he may be free. She says, “Lacci/che ligaste/quest’alma, /spezzatevi,” distributing her words in four different speeches, between which he responds “catene/che stringeste/ il mio cuore,/ rompetevi,” and so on for almost two pages (Perrucci 2008, p. 123). Though dialogue of this sort is linguistically very simple, semiotically it is quite complex. This becomes immediately clear when the dialogue is considered in the context of the conventions of the genre in which it is composed and simultaneously in those of the genre to which it alludes, which, of course, is opera seria. In addition to the poetic language of operatic love, with its highbrow vocabulary and emotional apostrophes, the individual segments of the speeches must be accompanied by gestures, tone, and tempo suggestive of the conventions of both genres. The actors playing commedia dell’arte lovers must appropriate and distort the gestural and linguistic vocabulary of the opera singers, simultaneously raising the tone of the broad comedy of their own genre and degrading the highfalutin one of their counterparts. The situation calls for a sophisticated performance

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style, for the actors must play commedia dell’arte lovers speaking as if they were operatic lovers without losing sight of the conventions that govern their behavior as comedic stock characters. They each must be in control of a literary and gestural rhetoric that can enable them to work in concert in order to represent characters unwittingly aspiring to achieve proximity to opera, whose lovers enjoy an aesthetic gravitas that is not normally within the reach of commedia dell’arte. The performers must not, however, turn opera into farce, since that would compromise the dignity of literary romance that lovers alone enjoy in the commedia dell’arte genre.

In the second type, the dialogue partners are from the lower class: he is a servant and she is a maid. They speak a variety of Neapolitan dialect rather than literary Italian, and their concerns are more earthy, though they converse flirtatiously about them under the cover of metaphor. The dialogue unfolds as a series of short one-line speeches with an obvious rhythmic flow, though not in any definite meter, clearly imitating the form of serious literary drama, perhaps even episodes of stichomythia in classical scenes. The servant claims that he is sick and needs the maid’s help to get better. She, on the other hand, wants to have nothing to do with him because, among other things, his illness could be contagious. The dialogue goes on at some length, but never is there any explicit reference to erotic desire as the real nature of the servant’s infirmity and the object of the scene. The conversation is conducted as if the two characters were talking about a physical infirmity. The metaphorical interpretation of a medicament must have been a popular motif. A variation of the one cited by Perrucci recurs in the second act of *Don Giovanni*, in which Zerlina promises Masetto a healing balm that will rid him of the pain caused by the beating that he has suffered, but neither he nor the audience have any difficulty visualizing its metaphorical meaning. In the scene from the spoken drama cited by Perrucci, both characters contribute to the story and so both must be in perfect attunement with each other.

If it is to be capable of simultaneous interpretation on both levels, the performance text requires personal inventiveness and partner collaboration in the extended use of metaphorical language. The literal meaning of the performance text must be as logical and as clear as the figurative one. Perrucci recommends this form of improvisation by citing from a Latin edition of the *Rhetoric to Alexander*, a work that then carried the full authority of Aristotle, though now it is generally attributed to Anaximenes of Lampsacus. In this treatise, he found a maxim that seemed to reflect a practice, of which he very much approved, in the construction of dialogue by commedia dell’arte performers of the turn of the seventeenth century. In such scenes, the actors must avoid using graphic expressions to describe sexual acts, or anything indecorous for that matter, but can talk about them indirectly by exploiting the suggestive power of innocent language, carefully chosen to carry a literal as
well as a figurative meaning. Do not use the nomenclature of indecent acts, says to aspirant orators the author of the *Rhetoric to Alexander*, “ne res turpes nominibus appelles turpibus,” because such words may offend the audience and undermine the validity of your performance. For actors that validity is a claim to aesthetic status, not inferior to that of the more established arts. In talking about such matters, we should signify them figuratively, “per aenigma significabimus,” creating lewd images in the minds of the spectators while overtly speaking about something altogether innocent (Perrucci 2008, pp. 152 and 179, citing Aristotle 1593, p. 176). The creation of such images depends almost entirely on tone and body language, that is to say, on the physical semiotic apparatus of which the performers are in possession.

**The semiotic structure of improvised dialogue**

The form of the composition process of these dialogue types may be represented as a matrix with two elements recurring in alternating position:

| a₁ | b₁ | a₁ | b₁ | a₁ | ... |
| a₂ | b₂ | a₂ | b₂ | a₂ | ... |
| a₃ | b₃ | a₃ | b₃ | a₃ | ... |
| a₄ | b₄ | a₄ | b₄ | a₄ | ... |
| ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |

Arranged horizontally in temporal sequence, these columns represent paradigmatically the sets of verbal and physical signs available to actors a and b. For a given scene, they designate the vocabulary that the actors can use to communicate with each other. The items in bold indicate, by way of example, the choices made by the two actors, each taking the lead by giving himself a compositional stimulus-response function in virtue of which he can create composite units of signs in the text-building process. In formal terms, we can represent this stage of the process in the form \( f(a₁) = a₁-b₃, \) \( f(b₃) = b₃-a₂, \) \( f(a₂) = a₂-b₄, \) \( f(b₄) = b₄-a₃. \) The segments \( a₁-b₃, b₃-a₂, a₂-b₄, b₄-a₃ \) are composite units of communication produced in a stimulus-response exchange when the compositional function \( f \) is applied to the first variable. The linear chain \( a₁-b₃-a₂-b₄-a₃ \) ... represents the subsequent performance text in the process of formation. In more complex cases, the paradigmatic principle remains exactly the same—another column needs to be added for a third character, and a further one if there is a fourth character—but the syntagmatic principle must take into account a much greater number of possibilities resulting from the different forms of collusion available to the characters.
We could safely dismiss the possibility of simultaneous verbal signs by two characters, but we would have to take into account the co-occurrence of the speech of one character and gestures of the other characters on stage. The final semiotic chain thus created would retain its linearity as a temporal and causal sequence, but it would be differently layered with gestural expressions from all the characters on stage. In formal terms, it would have a structure analogous to that of a musical score in which the melody moves linearly forward while harmony enriches with aesthetic sense different points along its path. The relationship between the plot-carrying segments and the gestural accretions by momentarily silent characters will give rise to a relationship of semantic consonance or dissonance in the semiotic form of each segment of the text, providing the audience with a basis for grasping the relative harmony in which the characters operate or the state of tension that may pit them against each other, threatening the stability of the plot of the scene as they have been perceiving it.

Just how many types of collusion were possible is not difficult to imagine. At the simplest and most primitive plot level, a company with no more than four actors (two lovers, an old man, and a servant) could produce all sorts of scenes about love or about sexual exploits on account of the presence of a collusive servant, a trickster capable of creating and escaping problems. The plots of larger companies include additional collusions in proportion to the complexity of the intrigue that could be woven in the scenario by expert intrigue-makers such as Scaramouche and Brighella, conniving old men such as Pantalone, and conspiring maids such as Smeraldina—all susceptible to the multiplicative influence of such collusion-generating stratagems as masquerades and mistaken identities. In a famous study of plot variety from a formalist perspective, Ludovico Zorzi reduced a very large number of scenarios to a diagram of plot lines available to a typical commedia dell’arte company. Thus, the Magnifico (forerunner of Pantalone) routinely interacts symmetrically, on a more or less equal basis, with the Dottore, and asymmetrically, from a position of power and authority, with the first Innamorata, the second Innamorato, the first Zanni, and a Courtesan (Zorzi 1980, p. 433). Collusion is overtly involved on a routine basis in at least two of the other characters (Zanni and Courtesan), and that is sufficient to complicate the construction of the performance text to a considerable degree. The resulting syntagmatic chain must include responses by the additional character(s) purposely designed to exploit the dramatic effect of equivocation.

From the formal model developed so far, which represents the minimum apparatus of improvisation, it is very easy to see that, as a composition process, improvisation has several interesting properties, all of which can now be formally established. The most basic of them, of course, is the graphic indication of the potential range of competence of each actor in the company.
and hence of the company as a whole, since the number and complexity of plot situations that the company can collectively sustain is directly proportional to the combinatorial possibilities of each actor’s inventory in the formation of composite units of performance text. Of course, the actual range of competence of an actor in the composition process depends on personal factors as well, and especially his power of quick recollection, which he needs in order to scan with his mind the entire collection of verbal and physical expressions before formulating his response to a given stimulus. The strength of memory required also varies directly with the fullness of the repertoire. It is significant in this context that several accounts of the commedia dell’arte from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries describe memory as one of the most important assets of a performer. Even the historian of literature Francesco Saverio Quadrio—who, however, cannot be credited with having understood the historical development of the commedia dell’arte—saw very clearly on this point. In his *Storia e ragione d’ogni poesia* (1744), he labeled “luoghi topici” all such repertory terms (Quadrio in Taviani and Schino 1982, p. 318). And it is scarcely necessary to observe that the study of topics to which Quadrio alludes is the branch of rhetoric on which rested the very concept of artificial memory, and hence of memory as a skill that could be acquired by practice and training.

In training for improvisation, commedia dell’arte performers commit to memory short sentences and phrases that can be easily adapted for use in any situation. Perrucci observed that successful actors come equipped with textual segments that can be adapted for any plot situation (Perrucci 2008, p. 102). Such segments work very much like a template on which to improvise new words. This is not to say that the meaning embodied in the performance text preexists as a fully formed object in the mind of the speaker. The content of speech is not formed until it is intentionally spoken. Words, we read in a contemporary dictionary of ideas, are like bells, “suonano cio’ che l’uomo vuole” (Rossi 1657, p. 345). Speech is the acoustical embodiment of meaning in the making and inseparable from it. The same is true of gestures: they are the physical embodiment of the thought in the process of being formulated or of the emotion in the process of being experienced. The emotional meaning of an improvised gesture is not a recollected meaning retrieved from memory and conveyed by a sign in the same form, but a meaning generated at once with the sign, with the modeling aid of memory and in response to a stimulus in the present.

As far as the art of memory is concerned, the training of orators is not very different from that of the actor. Both need to rely on the ability to recollect in order to compose a speech on the spot. Given the principle that spatial memory—such as the memory of the rooms in one’s house, for example—is not difficult to achieve and is reliable, the orators were trained to imagine
storing ideas, words, and examples in a set of places from which they could retrieve them when the need arose. The spaces used by orators were “commonplaces” because the material that they contained was common to all the arguments that could be built upon it. Cicero reminds us (Topica 2.7-8) that when a forensic orator needed examples to compose part of an argument directly in court, in response to new evidence, he would look for them in the places where he had stored them for that very purpose. Much of the material that commedia dell’arte actors jotted down in their personal notebooks, known as zibaldoni, was material of this sort, though it was not yet in the imaginary places to which they could have access on stage. Training in order to improve one’s power of recollection as a basis for improvisation must have made use of such a system, their common places being the typical plot situations in which the characters that they portrayed might find themselves.

Restated in compositional terms, rather than retrieval by recollection, a given actor’s common places were the paradigms or inventories of material available for the production of performance text in syntactical combination with something uttered by the other performer. Furthermore, since all the signs in an actor’s performance vocabulary are conceived as possible responses to some stimulus, which is itself found in the inventory of another actor, it follows that none of them has a gratuitous purpose. Ideally, every single verbal and gestural structure available to a member of the cast can be generated on stage as the second element of a composite unit of performance text. The ideal company, therefore, is a perfectly coordinated collective engaged in the assemblage of a performance, since, as a composite process, improvisation is necessarily a function of individual competence and concerted teamwork.

The addition of a new actor represents an accretive acquisition for the entire company, since in the process each member receives the benefit of new possibilities of semiotic combination. The new actor suddenly enables the company to explore lines of scene development previously unavailable to it and perhaps even to plan the boffo performance that is the ultimate goal of players after celebrity status. When Agostino Fiorilli, a distinguished Tartaglia, joined the company of Antonio Sacchi as one of its core members, the improvisational capacity of the group changed considerably, as did the type of play that they could produce. Tartaglia had been a very popular character in the Neapolitan and southern variety of commedia dell’arte but not especially known to Venetian audiences. For all intents and purposes, Fiorilli was new to the other members of the company as well as their usual audiences. The actors that appeared on stage with Fiorilli suddenly found themselves engaged in improvising dialogue with a convulsive stutterer, discovering in the process new ways of constructing meaning and humor with their own repertory of vocal and physical gestures. Tartaglia had been conceived as a character unable to say consonant-rich words without stumbling on the first
syllable and repeating it two or three times. This left his interlocutors and the audience with the task of guessing the rest of the words before he could actually say them. The actor improvising his role would choose to say a syllable that could figure in the initial position of various words. As Perrucci observes (Perrucci 2008, p. 144), if in speaking about another man, Tartaglia were to start repeating the syllable co, the other characters on stage with him would not know whether he wanted to say that the man in question was contento (content), consolato (consoled), or simply cornuto (cuckold). A skilled actor in the role of Tartaglia would be able to choose syllables that could be developed equivocally, both in gesture and language, by his co-performers, and he would moreover modulate his delivery so as to elicit a response from them as well from the audience.

Since in the commedia dell’arte stock characters are defined by highly conspicuous traits that distinguish them from one another, the addition of a new performer meant the addition of a new role for inclusion in new scenarios. It also meant the creation of new performance situations that would require the existing members of the company to modify their mode of delivery and to expand their performance vocabulary. Tartaglia’s speech impediment invites others to try to guess what he is thinking, to penetrate, as it were, through the opacity of his stammering, which temporarily conceals his intended message. Tartaglia’s speech impediment reorients the typical behavior of other characters. In collaborating with the actor impersonating Tartaglia, his co-performers would have to manifest with their posture, gait, and arms a response to the invitation issued by his stammering while they perform their own typical gestures in the joint improvisation of composite text. The performance disposition into which the actor draws his co-performers is one that the phenomenology of music performed by a small group of musicians—a chamber or a jazz ensemble—calls a tuning-in relationship, that is to say, a relationship in which the performers grasp immediately each other’s timing and communicative alignment prior to any external manifestation (Schutz 1970, pp. 215–216). By tuning into each other’s performance consciousness, the performers put themselves into a state of physical and psychological readiness to respond to each other’s prompting and to generate collaboratively the most appropriate combination of signs. Indeed, a relationship of reciprocal attunement may be regarded as the condition without which improvisation is not possible beyond the production of disjointed utterances and gestures.

A corollary that immediately follows from the need for such attunement is that a commedia dell’arte company cannot be very large, since each of its members must be thoroughly familiar with the verbal and gestural repertoires of the other actors with whom he might be on stage. Historically, this was in fact the case. We know from Luigi Riccoboni that, whereas in the rest of Europe the average company had at least thirty members, in Italy that number
was never greater than eleven (Riccoboni 1738, p. 36). The larger the company, the more difficult it is for its members to calibrate their improvisational style on stage against that of their potential stage partners.

An important question must now be considered: in the temporal structure of a composite sign, does the linguistic component precede, is it simultaneous with, or does it follow the physical one? In the performance of scripted drama, the tradition was represented in the clearest terms by Franz Lang, who, in his *De Actione Scenica* (1727) declared that gesture should always come first. On the basis of traditional psychology, Lang argued that apprehension is first experienced in the imagination, which, being itself a bodily organ, acts on the body from the inside, causing it to express in gesture and movement the psychological state of the subject. The physical expression of thought must therefore come before its vocalization, which requires a certain degree of abstraction before it can be issued from the body as a symbolic representation of thought rather than as a physical extension of it. In semiotic terms, we could say that, for Lang, gestures are indexical signs of thought, whereas words are merely symbolic signs, related to thought not by corporeal continuity but by convention (Lang 1984, p. 22). To the extent that drama is an imitation of nature, on stage gesture always precedes speech.

Perrucci, on the other hand, recommends the reverse, for script-based performance as well as improvisation. He reasons that gestures enacted before words can be confusing, and so gesture must follow speech, “deve dunque alla voce susseguire il gesto” (Perrucci 2008, p. 56). He adds, however, that there should not be unnecessary pauses or uncertainty. The gesture associated with a particular word must come immediately after it, without delay, and must be performed in such a way as to be an easily recognized expression of its intended meaning. Perrucci is not especially concerned with philosophical issues; his preoccupations are entirely pragmatic. His book on the art of performance is an excellent source on contemporary practices because, on the whole, it is descriptive and has a documentary intent. But as far as the relationship between words and gestures is concerned, he is not descriptive but explicitly normative (*deve dunque* la voce... ) on the basis of the principle of clarity. In such cases, at least for Perrucci, the composite unit of theatrical discourse has a fixed order and should be considered an indivisible unit.

What if the word is pronounced by one actor and the gesture performed by the second actor? The second actor may produce either the expected gestural response, continuous with the word just pronounced, or any other of many, each characterized by a different degree of improbability. The second actor may produce an unexpected response, a gestural, verbal, or combined segment, choosing to surprise the audience for immediate theatrical effect and to redirect the improvisation process. The question arises whether there
is a general principle that conditions the occurrence of a given segment at a particular point in the textual sequence. Because at any given time the possible states that the stage can enter are all items in the actual repertoires, they must have all occurred in various combinations in the theatrical tradition prior to the performance in question, and this means that their formal history as second elements in composite units of performance text can be expressed as relative frequencies of occurrence in the verbal and gestural language of the commedia dell’arte. Relative frequency, however, is just another name for probability. If in the theatrical tradition the composite units $a_i–b_i$, $a_i–b_{i+1}$, $a_i–b_{i+2}$, where $i$ is any number, have all occurred, though with different frequencies, they may now recur with the corresponding probabilities in a performance that purports to be part of that tradition. In this sequence of composite units, $a_i$ may have a higher probability of occurrence in combination with $b_i$ than in combination with either $b_{i+1}$ or $b_{i+2}$ and so on.

**A Markovian model of improvisation**

The stage’s progression through a succession of states until it enters one that is not susceptible of change—or, in other words, the production of linked segments of performance text until the end of the scene—in some way involves the relative probability of occurrence of each state in the series. Stated in technical language, all of this is equivalent to saying that commedia dell’arte improvisation is a stochastic composition process with an absorbing barrier (Attnave 1972, pp. 119–130). It is a process for the production of colligated theatrical signs conditioned by the relative probabilities with which they occur in the sign universe of the entire commedia dell’arte tradition. Once activated at the beginning of a situation, whose general character and orientation as defined in the scenario delimit the subset of that universe in which appropriate elements are to be found, the composition process combines units of performance text and, by assigning to each component the double function of stimulus and response, harmonizes them into a structurally coherent series. The series finally comes to an end when it reaches a sign that cannot function as a stimulus unless the stage’s field of operation is shifted to a different subset, corresponding to a new stage situation. The stochastic nature of the process warrants that the statistical distribution of individual signs and composite segments prior to the performance in question may be regarded as a basis for predicting the chance of their recurrence or for estimating the degree to which their presence in the evolving text may be expected by the audience.

Of course, this description of improvisation as a stochastic process does not imply that each member of the cast must be an accurate calculator of
probabilities every time he responds to a stimulus on stage. Creative and personal factors, such as intuitive knowledge of what is appropriate in anticipated response from the other actor as well as the audience, do indeed come into play. The stochastic process is an exact model, rather like the diagram of a perfect body in an anatomy text in relation to real bodies, all of which are somewhat different from the model. The function of the model is to help us understand the semiotic principles that are the underpinnings of real improvisations by different companies. Among the many merits of the model is the fact that “stochastic process” implies that the reception that is accorded to a performance by the audience is governed by the frequency distribution of each stage expression in the theatrical tradition familiar to the audience, and this in turn affects the actor’s choice of response to a given stimulus.

In improvising a segment of performance text, the actor must decide whether to surprise the audience by producing the least-expected response or to give them exactly what they expect along with the pleasure that comes with the sense of having made an accurate prediction. An engaged theatrical audience likes to anticipate the development of the performance text as much as it enjoys being surprised. Between the two extremes of, on the one hand, predictability, perceivable as structural regularity or as similarity to work already seen, and, on the other hand, unpredictability, which consists in the denial of predictions, there can be a huge gradient of solutions, each a minor modification of the other, from which the actor must choose a response and adapt it to the situation at hand. The difficulty lies in striking the right balance, because, for the audience, a sense that there is excessive order in the performance text is as annoying as the sense that there is excessive randomness. There can be no doubt that some controlled randomness is artistically desirable because the audience’s sense of surprise, intrigue, and comic suspense depend on it. But neither can there be any doubt that unless the performance text makes an abundant enough use of the code familiar and acceptable to the audience, the performance can be seen as an irritating challenge to tradition or, what would be worse, an incompetent production. And since the comic effect of a performance depends very little on the story and very much on the individual details of each plot situation, such consideration will have to govern the formation of every composite unit of performance text, whose second component will ultimately depend on the actor’s perception of what the audience anticipates as the most likely sequel in each case.

All of this demonstrates that, within the confines of the plot line indicated in the scenario, improvisation has another important formal feature, which is that the chance of the occurrence of a given sign depends on the occurrence of the previous one alone—intrinsically because it has the character of a response to a stimulus, and extrinsically because the audience’s anticipation
of the occurrence of a given sign is based on its frequency in the stage vocabulary in combination with the one that immediately precedes and provokes it. Processes that satisfy this condition are known as Markovian chains and constitute a special class of stochastic processes whose usefulness as a formal apparatus for understanding composition and performance is significant. There are, in fact, several art forms (music and farce, for instance) in which composition and performance involve random variables that satisfy the Markovian condition and that can be analyzed by means of the elaborate formalism that such condition makes available.

So *quidquid in buccam venit*... not quite. The *quid* of the performance text does not come to the actor on its own. Rather, the actor consciously produces it, choosing it from his performance vocabulary. The Markovian character of the process by which one *quid* is joined to another indicates that the actor’s creative choice is determined by the probabilities of succession that accompany the semiotic act that immediately precedes it. Each semiotic moment in the flow of improvised text is both retensive with respect to the one that precedes it and protensive with respect to the one that can follow it. The process involved is not different from informal off-stage conversation, in which the immediately preceding speech act determines the likelihood of the current one. If, in a stage dialogue situation, the first performer smiles, turns toward a particular point of the performance space, or raises his voice, the other actor is more likely than not to respond with analogous physical and vocal gestures. The same principle governs verbal exchanges, since the sense-building strategy inherent in the improvisational process generally limits the vocabulary available for possible response to an utterance by making some responses highly unlikely and leading the audience to expect the occurrence of one of the most probable responses. Protension opens the audience’s mind to a space of possible occurrences. It redirects the focus of the audience’s field of perception, physically as well as mentally, by assigning different probabilities of occurrence to the other actor’s physical and vocal repertoire.

Unlike real conversation, commedia dell’arte improvisation is an art form with aesthetic goals. The actor produces a *quid* as an act of creative performance, with an eye to aesthetic as well as semiotic fulfillment. The Markovian protension with which he invests it has an aesthetic as well as a semantic purport. The element of chance that governs his choice of response does not lead to unstructured non-sense and non-art but to the production of a performance text that is semantically consecutive and artistically satisfying. The logical ground for this assertion is found in the training and skill of the performers. Unlike casual speakers and amateurish improvisers, talented professionals avoid utterances in which a word or gesture coheres with the one that immediately precedes it but the structure as a whole is meaningless, as
when a noun figures as the object of a clause and the subject of the following one without the mediation of a relative pronoun (Saglia 200, p. 304). Such segments are artless as well as meaningless because they lack a strategy for the achievement of formal coherence and grammatical consistency. They are the result of an insufficient mastery of the principles involved in the creation of a play as a verbal and visual work of art. At the end of every utterance or gesture, chance indeed presents itself as perilously free creativity and risk of discontinuity, but for well-trained improvisers, the Markovian governance of textual flow helps structure the former and attenuate the latter. As they proceed from one semiotic act to the next within the universe of possibilities enclosed by the scenario, improvising actors rehandle previously acquired vocabulary by turning it into artistically and semiotically motivated Markovian chains.

A condition for such motivation is the essential memorylessness of the improvisational process at transition points. A Markovian chain is said to be memoryless in the sense that its past history does not play a role in the immediate determination of its next link. It is assumed, in other words, that actors have no memory of the episodes of the same play they have already improvised other than the one that has just ended. Only that semiotic event matters in the improvisation of the next one. The protensive reach of each semiotic act is not grounded in the earlier scenes of the play but only in the most recent one. The earlier history of the play affects the process only on a larger scale. In a given episode of the plot, the actors work within the boundaries imposed on them by the past actions of the characters they impersonate and by the dramatic action outlined in the scenario. Such boundaries delimit the semiotic vocabulary available to them for a given episode of the play, but they do not determine the probability with which a composite unit of performance text in that episode can be completed by the actors’ improvisational use of that vocabulary. However, if we consider the relationship between longer segments of performance text, segments such as scenes and acts that include many transition points, the system cannot be regarded as memoryless.

The logic of the dramatic action established by the succession of scenes already improvised governs, by progressive limitation, the shape of the play’s future development, and enables the audience to anticipate possible outcomes. The improvisational process can therefore be analyzed on two levels: the transitional one between individual semiotic acts and the cumulative one between the performed text considered as a whole and the scenes still to come. On the transitional level, improvisation is a first-order Markovian process—so called because it is focused on a sequence with one transition point—in which the probability of occurrence of a new segment is dependent only upon the actual occurrence of the segment that has just ended. The
present contains the seeds of the immediate future, encoded within it as possible lines of development, each with its own probability of occurrence at that particular point of the action. On the cumulative level, improvisation is a Markovian process of a higher order, based on a changing purview that includes more than one point of transition, in a series that grows from the second-order to the nth-order to the end of the play. In such a view of the text, memory plays an increasingly significant role.

With respect to the audience, the Markovian character of improvisation has an anticipative function, in that it prompts them to visualize plot development in a particular way rather than another. With respect to the actors, it has a limiting function, in that it restricts the plot material available to them for the improvisation of a given episode, progressively limiting it at each turning point of the plot. At the beginning of the play, when all possibilities of development are included in the universe of performance discourse latent in the scenario, the upper and lower order Markovian processes coincide. But they begin to differ at the end of the opening scene. From that point on, the improvisation of a new segment of text takes place in a process of increasingly higher order, in which the improvised text figures as cumulative memory of the performance.
The material conditions of improvisation in the various arts of the stage vary from one genre to the other. The production of the performance text is conditioned by the rules inherent in the art and the formal requirements of the genre. In all of them the performers begin by accepting the restrictions of the form and adapt their creativity to it in order to contribute to the creation of a performance text. In the spoken drama and in dance, some of the fundamental conditions of improvised performance are of a material nature, concerning as they do physique, degrees of motion, expressiveness of gestures, communicative potential of bodily configuration, and action in the context of the story being enacted. In this chapter, we shall focus on examples of three genres that involve an overtly semiotic use of the body. The first is about the representation of old age in the spoken drama of the late Renaissance, the second the representation of grotesque characters in scenic dance, and the third dance designed especially for the commedia dell’arte stock characters. In the first case, improvisation concerns verbal as well as physical language, both to be retrieved from a play text scripted after a commedia dell’arte performance. In the second, improvisation is only physical, examined from within the rules of scenic dance and studied in relation to two genres, serious and grotesque. In the third, it is examined in virtuosic dances, designed with a minimum of prescription and a maximum scope for improvisation.

Playing old age

In a delightful play by Virgilio Verrucci called *Il vecchio innamorato*, “The Old Man in Love” (1619), Old Age appears on stage allegorized as a crone, ugly and shabbily dressed, ready to speak the prologue to, and to set the tone for,
a performance of the sexual heroics of old Magnifico, alias Pantalone. The play was reissued many years later under the title *Il Pantalone innamorato*, “Pantalone in Love” (1663) with no change other than the name of the main character, now called Pantalone. Old Age is amazed, she says, that so many people continue to denigrate her, though they spare no effort trying to preserve their health so that they may reach her themselves. The play that she introduces belongs to the early commedia dell’arte tradition. It is fully scripted, though it is more than likely only the transcription for a readerly public of a performance text improvised on stage by a commedia dell’arte company. Such improvisations were already then made on the basis of a plot outline called a scenario, a series of virtuosic comic routines called *lazzi*, and a small set of well-defined stock characters.

Pantalone is the stock character who embodies the vices routinely attributed to old men in the contemporary discourse on aging, including lewd language and obscene gestures, lechery, avarice, anger, and hostility toward the young, the very people who, as the prologue says, alienate old age from their field of awareness while they are still young enough to do so. In the course of time, as the cultural history of old age began to change, Pantalone cleaned up his language and progressively attenuated his tendency for indecorous actions, eventually evolving into a stingy and cantankerous but protective father figure who warranted a sympathetic treatment. Here, however, I shall examine only the representation of Pantalone in the early tradition, when his old age had no redeeming virtue whatsoever. It was not presented commiseratively, and it elicited cruel and ostracizing laughter rather than either solidarity or indignation. In comedy in general, and in commedia dell’arte in particular, the audience sides with the victimizer rather than the victim. Pantalone is victimized by the young, and when we, the audience, laugh at him, we display our complicity with those who victimize old age through ridicule. In the expression “Playing Old Age,” the phrase *old age* refers to Pantalone himself, but the verb *playing*, which is the key word in the expression, refers to the actor who impersonates him. Accordingly, in examining specific aspects of the theme (particularly Pantalone’s lasciviousness), I shall keep my focus on the performer who plays old age rather than on old age itself.

Let us begin by asking: precisely, how old is Pantalone? There are various pictorial representations of the early Pantalone, but the most common one depicts him as very old and bent by the weight of his years to the point of having a hump on his back. In a play of 1613 called *Pantalone impazzito*, “Pantalone Gone Mad,” by Francesco Righelli, Pantalone admits that he is 79 years, 11 months, 3 weeks, 4 days, and 9 hours old, but he does not consider that too old by any means. Given the average life expectancy at the time, which may be estimated at about 60 or 65, Pantalone is a character of very
advanced age. The maid Franceschina thinks that he is so old that his head is already in the grave. The male servant Zanni, an early prototype of Arlecchino, describes Pantalone’s age with a graphic allusion to his drooping genitals. Old age, he says, has made Pantalone like a clock whose counterweights have fallen to the ground and can no longer beat the hours. All of this is hogwash as far as Pantalone is concerned: he is as strong as a stallion and has the sexual vigor of a 25-year-old. He is in love with the beautiful Livia, and he intends to demonstrate his full sexual potential as soon as he can slip into her bed.

The culture depicted by the commedia dell’arte is a heavily sexualized one, especially in the earliest period of its history. True to the principle, abundantly present in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century discourse on sexuality and old age, according to which lasciviousness in old men can be a most pernicious vice, Pantalone finds himself in erotic trouble with considerable frequency. Pantalone’s costume usually includes a codpiece large enough to flatter the view that he has of himself—that he is well endowed with the wherewithal to satisfy the ladies, so much so that he can look with confidence for situations in which he can offer and receive gratification. The actor impersonating Pantalone can safely play his sexuality even when the theme of the scene is not overtly erotic. Sometimes Pantalone’s sexuality is the explicit subject of a scenario, as in the fully scripted ones that I have already cited. More frequently, however, it is the subject of modular scenes of tomfoolery that can be easily integrated into the plotline of nonerotic scenarios, scenes for dialogic improvisation, both verbal and gestural. Pantalone falls in love with his son’s girlfriend, with Graziano’s wife, with Coviello’s wife, with the maid, with Lidia, and many others, all of whom, of course, reject his advances as those of a lecherous old man setting himself up for social ridicule. In a fine example from the seventeenth century, younger commedia characters take turns offering Pantalone demeaning comparisons for his erotic self-understanding, each speaking in his distinctive vernacular and unique physical style. Thus, they tell Pantalone that old men in love are like trees that can bear no fruit, and so are consumed by fire; they are like cannons made of leather, and so they fall apart after one or two firings; they are like camels burdened by their humps, and so they are unable to stand erect; they are like sick lions with little vigor, and so they are unable to raise their tails, and so on. Pantalone is mercilessly derided by all. The plurality of their voices may be taken as the voice of society.

The performative manner of this collective derision is worthy of a word or two of commentary, if for no reason other than to remind us of the fact that, in its most authentic tradition, the text of a commedia dell’arte play has no existence other than as performance, with a visual as well as a verbal dimension. The statements made by the younger characters are performed in
the context of an improvised dialogue with Pantalone, who does not respond verbally but is clearly expected to react visually to what they say. For the audience, spoken words and performed gestures do not belong to separate acts of perception but are received as a single phenomenon. In studying a segment of improvised performance text after the fact—in our case, several centuries after the fact—we cannot determine with precision either the gestural details involved in the exchange or the exact words spoken, but we can reconstruct, with a good degree of reliability, the creative matrix that defines the improvisatory potential of the scene for the actors playing it. In the scene of the collective derision of Pantalone’s lasciviousness, the comparisons may be analytically treated as stage directions of sorts, inviting Pantalone to respond by viewing his masculinity—ostensibly by gesturing to his genitals or by foregrounding his pelvis—in the unflattering mode suggested by his interlocutors.

The biomechanical base of Pantalone’s gesturing in such cases is not difficult to determine. If a young and healthy commedia actor were to play a character whose body were a clone of his own, he would get himself in a state of performance readiness by holding his spine as close as possible to his natural line of gravity, placing one foot forward and shifting most of his weight onto the leg in alignment with his body in order to facilitate the locomotion that he is about to start, without losing his balance. The movement economy of the actor’s body is a function of the principle of least exertion. Pantalone, however, was conceived as a character whose body, in its neutral state, is already in a configuration of distortion with respect to the actor’s body. A quick reference to the Renaissance discourse on the appropriate visualization of the ageing male physique may be helpful at this point. In the words of Leonardo da Vinci, who was a very careful observer of human anatomy and easily the most distinguished contributor to that discourse, old men should be visualized with “their legs bent at the knees when they stand still, and their feet placed parallel and apart, their backs bent, their heads leaning forward and their arms only slightly extended” (Leonardo 1877, p. 63).

This visualization of the biomechanically significant aspects of the anatomy of old age, appropriately stylized and enhanced in accordance with a general practice of the comedic stage, corresponds with considerable precision to early depictions of Pantalone, whose profile as an old man is further accentuated by his long cape, his tight-fitting clothes, his pointed beard, and the beaked nose on his mask. Such a configuration of the body reflects Pantalone’s peculiar version of stability and alignment with gravity. It is the matrix of his physical language, complete with such stylistic nuances as hesitancy, clumsiness, and uncertainty of movement, due to the parallel positioning of his feet, the angling of his knees, and the strained curvature of his back and neck, all of which conspire to make the inception of new movement visually awkward, technically difficult,
and physically demanding. This biomechanical matrix of old age determines how and what Pantolone may express physically, as well as what he may not do and where he cannot go. It is also the matrix that gives shape and size to Pantalone’s physical world, the space in which his movements can occur as signifying actions. Given the principle that the personal space around an individual is mapped out by him as the totality of his possible trajectories—that is to say, as an extension of himself as a dynamic being—Pantalone’s physical world is quite limited and is full of obstacles and impediments.

Natural as it is for the character, this biomechanical matrix is not natural for the actor who is about to play Pantalone’s version of old age. In his last preexpressive moment in the wings—the moment when, as Eugenio Barba would say, the actor brings his body into a state of readiness the way a musician tunes his instrument just before the concert—the actor steps into character by putting his muscles and joints into the configuration they have for Pantalone, so that the economy of his movements and the structure of the space available to him for their performance coincide with those of his character as a comic embodiment of old age. From that moment on, his gestural vocabulary and his patterns of locomotion are determined by this one material condition of performance. In the commedia dell’arte, in which characters have no inner life that is not fully expressed in body language and costume, stepping into character is chiefly a matter of anatomy rather than psychology. Whatever action the actor may improvise, in solo performance or in dialogical interaction with other characters, must be drawn from the field of possible expressions that may be generated by Pantalone’s physical language. Nothing else is within his reach, and nothing else is relevant.

The range of that field, however, is by no means insignificant. A quick survey of the total repertoire of lazzi for the characters of the commedia dell’arte tradition—1830 lazzi, in Nicoletta Capozza’s collection—reveals that Pantalone’s physical routines fall conveniently into four general categories: (i) quick actions in slapstick-style beatings and chases, (ii) contortions performed in imitating animals and other characters, (iii) acrobatic movements in simulating accidents, and (iv) physical routines performable without altering the basic posture and gait of the character in neutral state. The number of different routines that an actor can master in each category without crossing the boundaries of Pantalone’s physical language may be regarded as a direct measure of his skill and experience: the greater their number and the greater the degree of perfection with which he can execute them, the more credible his claim to virtuosic status in the art.

In studying the improvisation of Pantalone’s performance text, it is useful to speak of theatrical composition in terms of paradigmatic and syntagmatic procedures, analytical categories originally developed in the field of linguistics but clearly relevant to stage language as well. In the paradigmatic mode, the
actor remains within one category, in which the individual routines are variants of the same ideal prototype. When performed in succession, such *lazzi* enable the actor to display his virtuosic abilities and to impress the audience without advancing the plot. In the syntagmatic mode, the actor moves from one category to the other, as an agent of plot development. The totality of syntagmatic combinations that can be drawn out of the repertoire represents all the different physical narratives of old age available for the dramaturgical construction of the scenario before the performance, and for the creative improvisation of the details of the story during the performance itself.

As far as the physical narrative is concerned, improvisation is largely a matter of memory, retrieval, and variation of the actions that can be regarded as a function of Pantalone’s physique. It would be easy enough to draw illustrations of each category of motion from the rich collection of extant *lazzi*, but that is hardly necessary for present purposes. One or two routines will suffice to illustrate the issues at hand. A fine example is the composite *lazzo* in which Pantalone is fooled into thinking that he has been magically transformed into a donkey, with Graziano at his halter and Zanni astride on his back. Simple enough as a theme of farcical drama, donkey-playing of this sort is extremely difficult for the actor playing Pantalone, who is required to move around the stage, playing the part of an old man bent in the form of a quadruped with another man on his back. In order to mimic the movement of a donkey, he improvises gestures that may vary from braying, to smelling, biting, stubbornness, and slow movement. All of this must take place with ostentatious expressions of uncertainty and hesitancy. The actor playing an old man who is playing the part of a donkey needs to raise the expectation of a tumble and, at the same time, to keep undermining that expectation. Finally, Zanni and Graziano reward Pantalone for being a good animal by leading him to feed on the leaves of a bush into which the same magic spell had transformed Filippa, a woman after whom Pantalone had been lusting for some time. At this point, the improvisational scope of the situation is liberated, as Pantalone, relieved of the weight of Zanni on his back, can reacquire his neutral posture and enact his sexual appetite through the metaphorical language of animal and botanical metamorphosis that enables him to run his lips over Filippa’s body in full view of the audience.

In the farcical drama of the commedia dell’arte, in which verisimilitude is not binding on the imagination, the domain of acrobatic buffoonery is not limited to the young and the agile but can also include characters of advanced age, so long as the actions are performed within the appropriate biomechanical parameters by which the characters are defined. Among the oldest laughter-inducing devices of popular comedy, horseplay and tumbling figure prominently in the early commedia dell’arte tradition. Such actions are boisterous and cheerful, and are not restricted by the logic of realism.
In order to focus more clearly on how commedia plays old age, it is useful to compare the same action performed by a young Zanni and an aged Pantalone. In an early routine, Zanni crosses the stage and bumps into Pantalone, whom he had not seen for a long time. After some improvised confusion, they recognize each other and show their joy by taking turns in jumping onto each other’s back and running around the stage, until, after a few repeats with improvised variations, they both come tumbling down, without sustaining any injury. In this piece of buffoonery, the main laughter-producing detail is the comic suspense generated by the risk that the actor impersonating Pantalone may suddenly go into a state of disequilibrium, in which the pull of gravity may overcome both his skill and his strength. The element of risk is indispensable to the success of the scene, and in his improvisation of details—probably in the form of balancing acts, shaking knees, and shuffling gait—the actor will make its presence conspicuous, reminding us of Pantalone’s age while displaying his own merits as a virtuoso of the comic stage.

Being a young and acrobatic proto-Arlecchino, Zanni is in essence a vertically motivated character, who privileges the air over the ground. His biomechanical geometry is defined by upward vectors, emanating, as it were, from his feet, like the lines of an upside-down pyramid. When he raises Pantalone on his back to carry him around the playing area, he expresses the kinetic verticality of his body and tells his story by moving within the space enclosed by a pyramid whose base is several feet above his head. He moves by skipping, jumping, and dancing, quickly and with elegance. Pantalone, on the other hand, an old man leaning forward, with bent knees and arched back, is a character with a horizontally motivated body. He favors the ground to the air, his kinetic space being very much like a pyramid described by downward vectors emanating from his head to a wide base on the stage floor around his body.

This pyramid—and not Zanni’s—captures in a single purview all the possibilities of motion available to his body. It is the spatial extension of his being as the embodiment of old age, in the visualization of the early commedia dell’arte. When he raises Zanni on his shoulders, Pantalone is essentially performing a parody of Zanni’s action, retelling the same segment of physical narrative by inverting all that can be inverted.

Nor is such a spatial limitation of the dynamics of old age visible only in acts of acrobatic behavior. It is also foregrounded when Pantalone disguises himself as another character. In a modular scene that can easily appear in different variations, Pantalone disguises himself as Isabella, so that he may enter the house unnoticed to find out if she is cheating on him with Claudio. Zanni arranges for Pantalone to go to the bedroom window, where he engages in conversation with Isabella’s lover Claudio, who is standing in the street. Claudio is fooled by the disguise and mistakes him for the erotically enticing Isabella.
The humor of this scene is due, in the first place, to Pantalone’s cross-dressing as an alluring woman, all the while remaining fully recognizable as Pantalone, not only on account of his mask and costume, but also on account of his biomechanical disposition. In the second place, the humor is due to the fictional illusionism claimed by the dramatic situation, in which Isabella’s lover, Claudio, believes Pantalone to be Isabella. These are the prescribed moments of the story, set out in the scenario once the modular scene is inserted into it. The actor who performs them as Pantalone is required to improvise *lazzi* in the first part of the scene, where he displays his skill at adapting Pantalone to the womanly behavior of Isabella, and in the second part of the scene by displaying his skill at imitating a woman in a dalliance with her lover, without, of course, ever ceasing to be Pantalone. Such *lazzi* will necessarily be based on the commonplaces of female body language found in the Renaissance culture of social deportment. Moving from his state of readiness, the actor playing Pantalone playing Isabella assumes Pantalone’s typical gait, immediately regendering it, probably by making use of such stereotypical expressions of femininity as dainty steps, swinging hips, and flowing dress. For his scene at the window, he may perform *lazzi* of greeting, feigned shyness, and invitation using the gestural language of the late Renaissance, all through a performance filter that involves playing male old age in the process of playing female youth, parodying the cultural representation of both in an act of erotic conversation. Renaissance manuals on social behavior advised against the performance of such gestures in a way that called attention to body functions and sexuality, but we can safely surmise that, in their improvisation of the role of Pantalone, commedia actors did the very opposite. For the popular comic stage in general, and commedia dell’arte in particular, thrives on lewd speech and obscene gestures.

In performing simple body gestures as well as extended movements, the actor playing Pantalone playing a donkey or playing a woman must work within the parameters of old age, which are muscular debility and stiffness of joints. When he is about to improvise Pantalone in tumbling exercises and disguises, he enters his state of readiness by assuming Pantalone’s biomechanical limitations and by restricting his motor consciousness to the vectorial structure of a wide-based pyramid set on the ground around his body and pulling down on his back and limbs. As he moves within that base, he performs a segment of Pantalone’s physical narrative of old age, punctuating the continuity of his movement with gestures of hesitancy and clumsiness for the purpose of hilarious suspense, mordaciously parading the lasciviousness of old men, and generally presenting old age as a subject worthy of ostracizing laughter and emotional alienation. Thus was old age played by the early commedia dell’arte tradition.
Serious and grotesque dance

The form of dramatic dance, both serious and comic, is largely determined by the music, the scenario, and the rules governing the prescribed steps, which together represent the starting conditions of a particular dance narrative and the sine qua non of its articulation throughout the performance. These conditions, however, leave the performer with much scope for personal creativity, since they do not determine the full and exact movements to be executed by the dancer, but merely set the artistic boundaries within which the dancer performs unscripted actions in giving material and aesthetic existence to the dance. The scope of his required creative contribution places upon the dancer a great responsibility for the success of the dance on the semiotic as well as the aesthetic front. Ultimately it is the dancer who determines what the dance communicates at every stage of its performance and at what aesthetic level it manages to do so. In the exercise of that determination, the dancer’s handling of the semiotic vocabulary available for the dance may be described as an improvisational performance practice, motivated by aesthetic and semiotic objectives at the same time, in which small unscripted units of movement are brought together in the construction of the larger signifying actions and expressive gestures implicit in the starting conditions of the dance.

In the first two decades of the eighteenth century, the English dance master John Weaver focused on these issues in various treatises on dance and pantomime. His works represent the first major and systematic reflection on the vocabulary of theatrical dance, in the serious and comic genres. In these works he displays a degree of analytical rigor and conceptual precision previously unknown in the field. His examination of serious and comic scenic dance enables us to see how the semiotics of improvisation can be usefully understood as a function of the dancer’s compositional talent and of his grasp of the biomechanical nature of his art.

We begin with his understanding of serious dance, which in his *History of the Mimes and Pantomimes* (1728), he defines as follows:

By Serious Dancing, I would be understood to mean not only the genteel dancing in which the French have excelled, whether Brisk or Grave; and where an Air, Firmness, and a graceful and regulated motion of all parts are required; but also where such dancing shall represent any character that is either natural or belonging to ancient fable, or otherwise, where a nice address and management of the passions and gestures takes up the thought of the performer, and in which he is to shew his skill. (Weaver 1728, p. 56)
In his understanding, serious dance is populated by characters that have either the stateliness of myth or the verisimilitude of nature, endowed with grace and cultivated elegance. The dancers embodying such characters achieve refinement by skillfully controlling their personal stage address and their management of the passions and gestures. The terms *address* and *management* are analytical concepts. *Address* refers to the stage presence of the dancer and to his manner of presenting himself to the audience while performing the actions of the dance. *Management* refers to the compositional activity of the dancer in constructing signifying actions and gestures by skillfully rehandling the physical vocabulary of the dance.

In giving shape to signifying actions, says Weaver in his *Anatomical and Mechanical Lectures upon Dancing* (1721), the dancer has innumerable creative possibilities available to him, for the dancer’s ways of using the arms and hands alone can “vary according to Fashion, Fancy and Opinion” (Weaver 1721, p. 132). The dancer has considerable latitude of choice, in the exercise of which he must summon his talent and let himself be guided by his aesthetic judgment. Fashion is the external parameter of his creativity, a characterization of the audience’s artistic taste, and an indication of the aesthetic criteria by which his performance will be judged. Fancy is the internal parameter, a designation of his creative faculty as an interpretative artist, particularly in what concerns expressive and decorative details. When it is seen in the same purview as music, as dance inevitably is, fancy may also display a propensity for impromptu inventiveness, as the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century examples in the *Oxford English Dictionary* abundantly demonstrate. Weaver further emphasizes the personal nature of such creativity by coupling it with personal opinion, in a statement that carves out a role for intellectual subjectivity in the creative process of dance. Within the amplitude allowed by the rules, the music, and the scenario, the dancer’s consciousness oscillates between the external and internal parameters that inform the specificity of his performance. Fashion limits the dancer’s vocabulary and invites discretion, whereas fancy and opinion enlarge it and promote originality.

In using gestures to express emotions, the dancer must be aware of the fact that passions come with different degrees of emotional intensity. At their lightest level, they were known to Weaver as affections. Contemporary scholarship paid much attention to passions and affections as the primary motivators of human behavior. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they played a significant role in the scientific, ethical, and philosophical discourse on human conduct. Quite naturally, they also occupy a central place in the theory of dramatic dance, since the stories told by the dancers on stage are largely accounts of individuals brought together or asunder by the impact of emotions on behavior. The signifiers of each passion and affection consist of actions drawn from the comportment culture of the time, in which
they figure as indexical manifestations of inner psychological life. Both in real life and in its cultural representation on stage, Weaver could easily observe that the same emotion can be expressed by several physical actions, each of which, moreover, can be performed in different ways. It was clear to him that effective performance involves choice, and such choice places on the dancer the responsibility of creative improvisation. “So there are,” says Weaver, “not only different Actions for these different Passions, and Affections; but also, Variety of Actions for each of these Passions, or Affections; all of which the Dancer ought to know, and how to vary, as his judgment shall direct him; and to be elegant in his Choice” (Weaver 1721, p. 145). The correspondence between the domain of signified emotional states and the range of signifying actions is not a biunivocal relationship, since the number of signifiers exceeds the number of signifieds, and each signifier is moreover capable of receiving subtle modification and consequently of being replaced by an entire class of slightly modified signifiers. The excess of signifying actions, including all the modifications possible within the stylized vocabulary of the dance, is the exclusive domain of improvisation, while good judgment and elegance are, respectively, the skill and aesthetic sense that qualify the improviser as an interpretative artist. In his improvisational enrichment of a prescribed dance, the dancer selects the signifying action from those available to him in the gestural repertoire for emotional state in question, determines the ways in which that action can be varied for semantic precision, chooses the nuance that seems most appropriate to the visual narrative at that particular moment of the plot, and performs the movement improvising the performance text as if adhering to a script.

The outline of the narrative given to the dancer for rehearsal is analogous to the scenario of a silent scene on the spoken stage, albeit with the additional restrictions brought to it by the music, which regulates the tempo and rhythm of the action. In selecting the variation of the action with which to express the emotion in the scenario, the dancer must respect the music. He can vary on an impromptu basis only the features of the action whose modification is neither inconsistent with the music nor likely to alter beyond recognition the preconceived design of the movement. However subtle, the improvisational elements that he introduces into the performance text can have an enormous impact on the perception of the dance within the parameters of harmony jointly expressed by the music and the scenario. In many cases, the configuration of the hands and arms can be varied without violation of the principles of harmony. Such variations are sufficient for the dancer to direct the audience’s reception and interpretation of the dance. Aspectual dimensions of verbs of emotion, for example, require only slight modulations of the design of the action to shift the perceptive focus of the audience from the inchoative to the durative or the perfective embodiment of
the passion that informs a particular moment of the plot. The orientation of
the palms, the expression on the face, the rotation of the head in relation to
to the direction of the gaze are all devices of inflection, as are the controlled
raising and lowering of the body.

In improvising such a nuanced performance, the dancer can be greatly
 assisted by his knowledge of painting (Weaver 1721, p. 146), from which he
can learn how to enrich a design with the dance equivalent of subtle shading. In
the performance of actions that require vertical movement of the frame of the
body, the personal enrichment of expression can be achieved with contained
variations of sinking and rising, which, in Weaver’s view, are to dancing “as
light and shade are to painting” (Weaver 1721, p. 138). Such improvisations
do not alter the basic design of the dance as a signifying structure, but they
enrich it with meaning and aesthetic value. Weaver here is only a short step
away from saying that the contribution of improvisation to the execution of a
preconceived dance is analogous to the expressive power that a chiaroscuro
artist can bring to a simple design. Improvisation enhances a movement
pattern, enriching it with a visual appeal that captivates the imagination of the
perceiver. In short, it turns a kinetic structure into visual art.

An achievement of this nature is possible only if the dancer has
mastered the art of stage address. Such mastery is what makes a dancer
an interpretative artist. Dance address should not be mistaken for a natural
disposition to the dance, a competency with which one may be endowed
by nature at birth. Rather, it is a talent that is acquired through training.
“This address and Motion of the Body is not, as some are willing to believe, an
Air, or manner, natural to some but it is a perfection acquired with
Judgment and altogether Artificial,” says Weaver in his Essay Towards an
History of Dancing (1712, p. 162). Such perfect address is more difficult to
achieve in comic than in serious dance. Weaver’s less sympathetic readers,
conditioned by the literary and aesthetic tradition, might be skeptical about
such a proposition. The comic grotesque, they might argue, is a species
of farce, and farce is generally located at the lowest level of the hierarchy
of artistic merit. In relation to scenic dance, grotesque could therefore be
considered a mere diversion, a momentary concession to hilarity, however
stylized it might be. The conclusion from such premises is that grotesque
dance could not possibly be the fruit of a more demanding art than that
required by serious dance. Weaver, however, allows his readers no latitude
of judgment in the matter: Grotesque dancing “is much more difficult than
the serious, requiring the utmost Skill of the Performer” (Weaver 1712, pp.
164–165). The main reason for this difficulty is that grotesque dance was
conceived as a subversion of some aspects of serious dance without leaving
the realm of higher art. In order to understand how this is so, it is necessary
to consider Weaver’s definition of grotesque dancing:
By Grotesque Dancing, I mean only such Characters as are quite out of nature; as Harlequin, Scaramouch, Pierrot, etc. ... Grotesque, among Masters of our Profession, takes in all comic Dancing whatever: But here I have confin'd this Name only to such Characters, where, in lieu of regulated Gesture, you meet with distorted and ridiculous Actions, and Grim and Grimace take up entirely that Countenance where the Passions and Affections of the Mind should be expressed. (Weaver 1728, p. 56)

Grotesque dancing is presented as the inverse of serious scenic dance. Where the characters of serious dance are natural and express themselves by means of dignified facial gestures and graceful, elegantly designed actions, grotesque characters are unnatural and communicate by means of grimaces and actions that distort those of serious dance. Grotesque dance lowers the serious into the ridiculous, and requires a mode of address that invites the collusive respect of the audience in the debunking process. Serious and grotesque are art forms related by binary opposition, the grotesque being conceived as a stylized mocking of the serious. In the scenario of a full performance, grotesque characters routinely appear before and after the scenes of serious characters, so that the typical actions of the latter may recall their distorted analogues from the preceding scene and be recalled in turn by the distorted ones of the following scene. Grotesque characters do not distort the story enacted by the serious characters, but only their identifying and self-expressive physical actions. Filtered through the prism of the grotesque vocabulary, the actions, passions, and mannerisms of the serious characters appear “so intermixt with Tricks and Tumbling, that the Design is quite lost in ridiculous Grimace, and odd unnatural Actions” (Weaver 1712, p. 168). The physical language of grotesque dance is described in terms of the language of serious dance because it was conceived as a parody of it. The grotesque dancer, we can surmise, begins with the design of a serious action and proceeds to achieve the artistic effect of the grotesque by subjecting that design to a degrading process. Such a process would mimic in training what must have happened historically, for the grotesque, according to Weaver, originated as a transformation of the art of pantomime “the ruins of which still remain in Italy; but sunk and degenerated into Pleasantry and merry conceived Representations of Harlequin, Scaramouch, Mezzetin, Pasquariel” (Weaver 1712, p. 168). The discerning eye will see in the antics of grotesque dancing the movements from which they originate, both historically and artistically. Grotesque dancers decode the conventional stateliness of serious dance and recode it, improvising attitudes, positions, and gestures that are recognizable as distortions of their elegant models, themselves brought back to imaginary presence as objects of signification by allusion. Grotesque dancers thereby raise in the consciousness of the audience identifying images of the
movements that they parody. When it is most successful, the improvising process provokes in the audience the sense of a double perception in a single semiotic act.

The level of physical virtuosity involved in the improvising process is intuitively clear. Weaver, however, provides us with a scientific method for assessing the degree of physical dexterity required in the creation of grotesque performance text. In his *Anatomical and Mechanical Lectures upon Dancing*, a veritable treatise in biomechanics written almost two centuries before the term itself was coined, he summons to his aid the latest advances in the scientific disciplines concerned with the precise description of all aspects of human motion, anatomy, physics, and geometry. Of particular interest is Alfonso Borelli’s *De motu animalium* (1685), which is named as a primary source (p. xiii), though Newton’s *Principia mathematica* (1687) is presupposed in various places of Weaver’s discussion, especially in his analysis of the curvature and strength of bones most involved in the performance of demanding movement (p. 99). Such works represented at the time the best scientific base for a reflection on dance in terms of biological mechanics, which could enable Weaver to understand the body in such terms as springs (muscles), levers (bones), balance, and curvature. The same base made possible a reflection on dance in terms of gravitational mechanics, which offered the reader a powerful formal apparatus for understanding the body’s natural tendency to maintain itself in perfect balance with respect to the line of gravity. All human motion, however complex, can be analyzed by means of Weaver’s biomechanical model. Given a serious dancer’s line of gravity, what precisely takes place when he assumes a dance pose in order to communicate a given message to the audience? And what can a grotesque dancer do to transform that pose by inventive improvisation into a ludicrous distortion without tumbling down as in a circus act and compromising the aesthetic status of his dance?

Biomechanics enables the dancer (and the reader) to analyze the phenomenon of physical virtuosity with a degree of precision and rigor far beyond that of intuitive understanding. A convenient starting point for this type of analysis is found in a statement by Borelli, which, in a translation by the natural philosopher and theologian William Derham, was destined to enjoy great currency in eighteenth-century England. Borelli observes: “It is worthy of Admiration, that in so great a Variety of Motions, as running, leaping, and dancing, Nature’s Laws of Aequilibration should always be observed; and when neglected, or wilfully transgressed, that the Body must necessarily and immediately tumble down” (English in Derham, 1714–1716 p. 287). This principle is basic to all biomechanical approaches to dance. It applies to serious and grotesque alike. The difference is that the grotesque consciously approaches the point of continuous risk, and having reached it, turns it into an
integral aspect of performance, without leading to a fall. The binary opposition that separates the biomechanical vocabularies of serious and grotesque dance takes the form of a parodic decoding and recoding of the former by the latter. In the early eighteenth century, serious dance presupposes directions of motion and degrees of curvature that do not involve extraordinary muscular exertion and unnatural twisting of joints. The semiotic vocabulary of grotesque dance, on the other hand, requires directions of motion and degrees of curvature calculated to send the body into a state of disequilibrium without causing it to come tumbling down. Serious dancers move on a flat surface; grotesque dancers move on the same surface but must frequently pretend to overcome formidable difficulties. A grotesque dancer may be required, for example, to give the impression that he is climbing a ladder or going down a steep hill. In order to perform such a movement, the performer must create an unnatural angle between the soles of his feet and the line of his legs and maintain it for some time. To walk that way on a flat surface is exceedingly strenuous because the configuration that it requires is unnatural. Given this simple observation, says Weaver, “we may easily conceive how much more laborious grotesque dancing will be than the Serious” (Weaver 1721, p. 125). Having put his body in an unnatural shape, always on the verge of disequilibrium, the grotesque dancer enacts the unit of narrative assigned to him in the scenario, making every effort to elicit at the same time the laughter of the audience for the message signified and their admiration for his virtuosic display of skill and strength with which he signifies it.

It is easier for a dancer to stand in a natural position and cross the stage, with rhythmical and stylized steps, exhibiting “a nice address,” than it is for him to do so by twisting his body into the figure of a large insect that moves along imitating the motion of an elegant dancer without overcoming the limitations of his shape as an insect. Ascending and descending, walking over and around invisible impediments, imitating various animals, or, as in one popular routine, pretending to be a pregnant woman about to give birth—all such motions are part of the semiotic wherewithal of the grotesque pantomimic dancer, the materials he uses to improvise actions that can simultaneously signify and deflate the seriousness of serious dance without leaving the realm of high art, to which grotesque dance also belongs. The incongruity between the semiotic vocabulary of naturalness and the communicative behavior of the grotesque, informed by the derogatory intent inherent in all forms of distortion, is what makes the movement vocabulary of the grotesque character appear comic. The skill with which the distortion is accomplished in performance is what can make grotesque dance great art.

In the biomechanical terms employed by Weaver throughout his treatise, much of the movement vocabulary of grotesque dance may be regarded as a function of two variables, which are frequently met in the contemporary
discourse on motion. The two variables are innixion, or the imaginary line orthogonal to the horizon that runs through the dancer’s center of gravity as his natural direction of rest, and propension, or the line along which the dancer shifts his weight when he abandons his vertical posture. As he departs from his line of innixion, the dancer may suddenly discover that he is at the point of falling, and to prevent this from taking place he quickly compensates by moving his head, extending his arms, and arching his torso in the opposite direction, redirecting the line of propension through his center of gravity in order to reestablish his equilibrium. The geometric relationship between his lines of innixion and propension determines the amplitude and shape of his reconfigured posture as well as the creative semiotic purport of his body in action.

Grotesque performers adopt different styles of compensatory movement, consistently with the identifying mannerisms of the characters that they impersonate. Weaver does not offer any details, but we may surmise what he probably observed by taking into account the contemporary (or near contemporary) discourse on the actions of commedia dell’arte performers. Hogarth, for example, in *The Analysis of Beauty* (1748), offers a concise but exact geometric description of the typical actions and gestural mannerism of the commedia dell’arte characters that had started to populate early British pantomime. He observes that Pierrot’s movement patterns can be reduced to “perpendiculars and parallels,” almost as if they were a geometric projection of the folds and long sleeves of his costume, itself designed to suggest the desire to stay fixed on the line of innixion that marks his state of rest. Pulcinella, instead, moves his limbs as if he were a hybrid human-mechanical being. His joints are analogous “to the hinges of a door” and therefore he is incapable of any natural curvature. Harlequin communicates by means of “certain little quick movements of the head, hands and feet,” elementary units of motion cleverly fused into single semiotic acts. The constituent parts of his physical language appear to “shoot out as it were from the body in straight lines or are twirled about in little circles” (Hogarth 1753, p. 149), which may give the impression that he is little more than a playful geometric construct.

This is tantamount to saying that his physical vocabulary is nothing more than the geometric form to which he can be reduced by abstracting away his body and costume. Such a formalization of his physical vocabulary and of his style of motion—small angular and circular designs, staccato phrasing, fast-paced action, acrobatics against the pull of gravity—indicates that his language can be only the language of a virtuoso, for, as Doris Humphrey observes in *The Art of Making Dances* (1959, p. 98), the natural tendency of ordinary human beings is to work with gravity rather than against it, avoiding angularity and small geometric designs in favor of uninterrupted curves and legato phrasing that do not put equilibrium at risk. Only a highly trained
and highly skilled dancer can give a brilliant performance on the verge of disequilibrium, displaying throughout an appealing address as an artist and a dazzling management of the semiotics of the passions.

**Figure, form, and narrative dance**

Long before the term improvisation began to acquire currency in the theory and study of dance, the Venetian dance master Gregorio Lambranzi published a book, in Italian and German, entirely devoted to it, the *Nuova e curiosa scuola de’ balli theatrali–Neue und curieuse teatralische Tantzschule* (Nuremberg 1716). The book remained unknown until it was rediscovered by Cyril W. Beaumont, who issued an English translation in 1928. The book is a manual of dances for improvisation, all based on Lambranzi’s own career as a dancer in Italy, Germany, and France. It includes 101 plates engraved by Johann Georg Puschner, each displaying the figure of a character performing a particular dance and a phrase or two of the musical air to which the dance is to be performed, accompanied by a very concise prose scenario in the form of a gloss. A group of twenty-three plates depict characters of the commedia dell’arte, all easily recognized by their costumes and typical poses. Each page is a graphic teaching module in which the reader can find, quickly and by simple inspection, all that he needs to grasp the basic aspects of process for the improvisation of a particular dance. Instead of offering his reader a symbolic choreographic representation of the dance, Lambranzi adopts a far more concrete approach, showing only the music, the figure of a dancer striking a pose, the costume that he should wear, and an accompanying description of the dance in the guise of a brief scenario. Only the first three items are indispensable to the improviser. The book can be useful to the general student of dance history, but as a manual for improvising particular dances, it is clearly meant for highly trained practitioners of the art.

Of the three essential components of the module, the first and the third require little commentary: the music, in most cases composed by Lambranzi himself, is no more than a few phrases, which can be repeated in order to give the dance the duration required by the narrative enacted on stage. The costume enables us to identify immediately the commedia dell’arte characters that populate Lambranzi’s dances. The engraved figure, however, merits a gloss. In Lambranzi’s choreography and in Italian dance scholarship, the term *figura* has a precise meaning that does not come through entirely in the English “figure” without a gloss. A *figura* is an iconic representation of the fundamental position of the dance, frozen in an instant that suggests the appropriate way of executing its full dynamics, including the inclination of the head, the orientation of the torso, and the position of the legs and arms. Each
In reducing his own dances to such figures, Lambranzi has in effect followed a process of partial abstraction, stopping his regressive movement toward pure form at a stage where the representation of the dance could retain its full iconicity. Such a figure is the product of a process of formalization based on a real model. A dancing figure is a visual representation of an empirical dance, obtained by its progressive dematerialization, rather like a geometric figure constructed to represent a tangible object of that shape. Both figures can be used to generate other dances and objects of the same class as the original models. Complete formalization would replace the figure with abstract notation in both cases but would surely be less productive as a teaching tool. From a phenomenological perspective, such a partial reduction of reality to an abstract visual form may be said to be “an open and incomplete formation, one bursting with indefinite meaning possibilities and many possible lines of development” (Hass 2008, p. 157). Those lines of development are all pathways to improvisation. Such improvisation is not possible for all readers. Although Lambranzi does not say so explicitly, it is clear that some of his dances require not only creativity, but also muscular strength, suppleness of limbs, and virtuosic training.

Lambranzi reserves some of his most demanding dances for his favorite commedia character, Scaramouche. A very clear example of the difficulty involved in Scaramouche’s dances is the one with which Lambranzi opens his series on the commedia dell’arte. The scene opens with the appearance upstage of a very short and fat creature, with the head and feet of a man and the rest of his body wrapped in his cloak as if in a farthingale hanging around his neck. Inside the cloak the dancer is positioned like a crouching caryatid, with his knees bent and his heels at his buttocks. Starting from this position, he slowly dances his way toward the audience, progressively increasing his height until he regains his full stature downstage. There he throws his cloak behind him, springs into the air with his legs fully extended, performs a caper, drops to the floor, repeats the dance with capers of various kinds, and ends by performing his signature step, the pas de Scaramouche, a stride in which, without bending his knees, he moves his feet so far apart that he virtually touches the boards with his thighs—only to spring up again and carry on with the scenario into which the scene is embedded.

The fundamental premise of such a scene is good casting: muscular strength, flexibility, and sophisticated training are essential to the successful execution of the dance. The audience must be brought to laughter and admiration at the same time. The biomechanical conditions governing the improvisation of signifying movement are extremely restrictive. The movement designs available to the crouching dancer at the beginning of the scene will
look necessarily unnatural and resemble more those of lower insects than those of human beings, a comparison likely to give rise in the minds of the spectators to the idea of animal–human hybridity congenital to the aesthetics of the grotesque. At first, the dancer proceeds downward to the front as if by blind kinesis, with little freedom of movement on the horizontal plane and none on vertical. He can improvise steps only by introducing minor variations in his kinesis, signifying with them the low and primitive nature of his being. While he regains his height, he changes the form of his steps and body movement, investing them both with elegance and signifying power. Animal-like movements begin to acquire a recognizably human aspect. As the figure of the outlandish dwarf, wrapped in a farthingale and anchored to the ground by his biomechanical frame, extends his limbs and springs weightlessly into the air, the dancer celebrates with cheerful capers the character’s freedom from his original form. The message signified by the dance is that a virtuoso of the art can reveal all the aesthetic lyricism that lies concealed even in the oafish and the bizarre.

The more virtuosic the dancer, the greater his potential as an improviser. In the introduction, Lambranzi observes that Scaramouche’s dances cannot be easily copied by lesser artists, including as they do grandi, lunghi e spropositati passi difficili da immitarli (Lambranzi 1716, p. 1). This is true not only for his signature pas, but also for all the other steps involved in the dance, which seems to be conceived for an exceptional dancer. Lambranzi composed his dance by juxtaposing elements taken from the repertoire of acrobatic lazioni in the performance tradition of the commedia dell’arte—those that require the actor to assume the biomechanical limitations of an animal or an insect—and elements from serious dance. He arranged them in the thematic order of positive development and left everything else to be improvised by the dancer. From an aesthetic perspective, the improvisation based on commedia elements is of a freer nature despite the physical restrictions imposed on the performer, for there are no mandatory models of movement for him to follow. The nature of improvised movement derived from serious dance is conditioned by rules of form, the violation of which would render the movement nonartistic. Such restrictions notwithstanding, there is considerable freedom of compositional and performative invention. Lambranzi says that he should perform cabriole a diverse maniere, that is to say, capers of different types. A caper is performed by thrusting one leg into the air at a certain angle to the body and kicking it to a higher position with the other leg before landing. The action is susceptible of considerable variations, each with a unique semiotic nuance. The dancer can vary the elevation of the first leg until it is orthogonal to his body, perform two or more quick kicks instead of one, orient his body at different angles to the audience’s line of sight, and finish by positioning his body into an arabesque, among
other things. In the scenario given by Lambranzi, *cabriole a diverse maniere* should be understood as the heading of a paradigm for a series of closely related movements each of which could be used to full effectiveness in the same syntagmatic chain of movements suggested by the dramatic action. Many narrative syntagms are possible, all available for improvisation without violation of the rules of form.

The construction of syntagmatic chains can be dramatically complex and even episodic, particularly when it involves two characters. In a sequence depicted in two figures (29 and 30), the scene opens with Harlequin cheerfully dancing by himself in his peculiar style, *a sua maniera*. Scaramouche approaches him with a lantern, which is a stage property for the semiotization of darkness on a plainly lit stage, mimics him for a while, goes offstage, returns with a musket, attaches a lit candle to its barrel and shoots him. Harlequin drops dead to the ground but soon rises unscathed to resume his dance in another area of the stage. Scaramouche returns with a lantern to look for the body, but is unable to find it. Harlequin notices this and decides to play dead, causing Scaramouche to trip over his body. Scaramouche lifts him, stands him up as if he were a mechanical puppet, turns his head back and forth in various directions, throws him over his leg, and finally takes him onto his back to carry him offstage, as if going home from a hunting expedition.

The paradigmatic variations available to the dancer portraying Harlequin are numerous, since the scenario does not suggest any formal limitations by naming a particular dance. Whatever he dances, it must be in Harlequin's unique style. A dancer trained to dance this particular role is likely to choose a chaconne, as his basic pattern, since the chaconne was then rapidly becoming the character's most typical dance (Thorp 2014, p. 118). But the musical phrases can support various types of dances, as Lambranzi suggests, and so the dancer cast as Harlequin is free to choose not only variations of the chaconne but variations of other dances as well. The most interesting improvisatory aspects of the sequence, however, are those involved in the copycat behavior of Scaramouche and his handling of the body of Harlequin. In the imitation scene, Harlequin can purposely introduce unexpected variations into his dance, which Scaramouche must then mimic in his own style without preparation. He must move like Harlequin, copying his angular motion and quick gyrations, without ceasing to be Scaramouche and without displaying full possession of Harlequin's movement style. As we have already seen, Lambranzi's Scaramouche is a very agile character, but his biomechanical identity is quite different from Harlequin's.

In the scenes of his interaction with Harlequin's body, Scaramouche is able to handle it as if it were the body of a puppet—putting him in a standing position, moving his head at will, folding him over his leg—precisely because sophisticated puppet-like behavior is part of Harlequin's cultural history. Within
the narrative fiction of the dance, Harlequin plays dead and thereby turns himself into a curious plaything for Scaramouche. Outside that fiction, his body becomes a stage prop for the performer dancing the role of Scaramouche as the agent in control of their joint improvisation of text. The two dancers thus collaborate in improvising the visual narrative of the episode, compounding Harlequin’s movements and Scaramouche’s expressions, as the latter dances off into the wings carrying Harlequin on his shoulders. The audience is left with a sensation of superimposed hilarity and darkness, such as are usually provoked by tragicomedy. The dancer in the role of Harlequin exercises control over the comic dimension of the performance. When playing being dead, he can establish hilarious complicity with the audience by improvising reactions to Scaramouche’s puzzlement. The dancer who plays Scaramouche controls instead the dark side of drama, in keeping with the air of mystery that is frequently associated with the character of Scaramouche in the performance tradition: he shoots Harlequin, after all, without apparent motivation, as if driven by an interior impulse to do so. The balance of tragic and comic aspects of the performance can be easily shifted by the dancers improvising in concert, in response to each other and to their perception of the audience’s reaction.

In the little drama that takes place after Harlequin’s presumed death, the dancer in Scaramouche’s role improvises movements as if responding only to an external stimulus, namely, the curious mobility of Harlequin’s neck and limbs. In fact, the contribution of stimuli from within his person, that is to say, the causes of movement design and performance ideals found in his training and in his grasp of the aesthetic dimension of his body in motion, always plays the primary role in performance. But the episode is constructed to shift the focus of the audience’s attention away from the interior life of the performer and onto the narrative being enacted. This can occur only if the dancer structures his movements as a response to the dramatic situation in which his character finds himself. Scaramouche is intrigued by the degree of rotation of Harlequin’s neck, and so he begins to test it by twisting it in various directions. The dancer, however, is not so intrigued by his dance partner but is propelled by the interior forces of his skill and his creativity. The feigned external causes of improvisation are necessary for the shaping of theme and narrative; the internal ones are the stuff of drama and performance.

Lambranzi makes full use of the difference between externally- and internally motivated movement design in his dance of Scaramouche and two smaller versions of the same character. Scaramouche walks onto the stage carrying two large baskets suspended from a shoulder pole. He deposits the baskets, moves to another area of the stage, and gives a solo performance. We may pause here to observe that in all cases, including solo performances,
Lambranzi’s grotesque characters begin dancing by assuming one of the five false positions, which mimic the true starting positions of classical dance but knees and toes inward and heels outward, rather than the reverse (Lombardi 2000, p. 144). Lambranzi leaves no doubts on that score: grotesque characters assume *positure false e ridicule* (Lambranzi 1716, p. 2). The false positions are relevant to the argument because they are awkward in themselves and difficult to develop into other steps. In other words, they are perfect for dancers of commedia dell’arte characters, who are supposed to exhibit precision and creativity in their use of techniques of awkwardness while conveying messages of gracelessness, social as well as aesthetic. Since at the initial stage of the dance there is no narrative to constrain Scaramouche’s movements and no external object to provoke him to respond in a particular way, he probably performs his favorite pieces, which are the long stride (*pas the Scaramouche*), capers (*cabrioles*), and spins on one foot (*pirouettes*), all of which he executes in another scene of solo performance in the same manual. In performing them, Scaramouche moves under the impulse of interior forces, displaying an aspect of his character through the language of the dance. The dancer impersonating him in the dance displays his skill as interpretative performer of the commedia dell’arte character. In neither case is the movement design externally determined.

As soon as Scaramouche finishes his dance, the two smaller Scaramouches come out of the baskets—which they probably enter through trap doors under the basket shells—and send him tumbling to the ground with a push, improvising a bit of buffoonery as in classic horseplay *lazzi* of the commedia tradition. They then perform Scaramouche’s dance themselves as a scaled-down imitation of his, conspicuously improvising their actions as a response to the external stimulus of their object of imitation. During their dance, Scaramouche is a spectator on stage, watching himself being mimicked by characters that are themselves imitations of his person and costume, and improvising gestural reactions to what he sees, which is his dance deformed and his figure ridiculed. Much of the appeal of Scaramouche’s dance lies in the verticality of his whirls, the elevation of his capers, and the elongation of his stride, none of which can be in the domain of the small Scaramouches. Their actions appear necessarily earthbound when they should be vertical, and exceedingly short when they should be unnaturally long. They improvise by mimicking a parallel structure, but they can succeed only in performing a comic gloss to it. Scaramouche is obviously annoyed by them and, in another scene of buffoonery, captures them, forces them back into their baskets—from which they probably egress through the bottom—and feigns carrying them effortlessly offstage with elegant long strides.

As in the other examples examined, in this scene the reader is naturally led by the text to assume the position illustrated by the figure of the dancer.
in the act of dancing. One effect of this identification is that, in reconstructing Lambranzi’s dance to the point illustrated by the engraver, the reader proceeds as if he were recollecting it himself from his own training and experience. This enables him to make use of virtual memory as a creative base in the pursuit of the dynamic implications of the figure, imaginatively improvising the completion of the dance through an act of fictional interiorization. By projecting himself into the position of the pictured dancer, wearing his costume and assuming his pose, the real dancer places himself in a state of biomechanical readiness for creative improvisation. All the possibilities of development are potentially available to him, and he chooses to follow one narrative rather than another on the basis of his intuitive grasp of the narrative logic of the moment. That logic, however, though open ended, is not without restrictions. As we have seen, some of the dances are prescribed, though their variations are not.

Considered in its relationship to its surroundings, the body may be regarded as the physical totality of the skills and actions potentially available to the subject that inhabits it. It is an enabling and limiting set of material conditions that determine behavior. Operating through the filter of embodied skills and potentialities, the subject configures the world, in its physical as well as its social aspects, as an environment that elicits the response of which the subject is capable. The difference between the responses of different individuals is largely a question of the varying range and degree of skill that they embody. Harlequin can skip effortlessly over an obstacle that Pantalone must negotiate with strain and ingenuity. When the dramatic situation presents the character with an environment entirely within the reach of his physique, his reaction to the world is habitual and predictable. But as soon as an unexpected complication is introduced, his actions are improvisatory and inventive, as he tries to conquer the material limitations of his skills, stretching them to the degree required for him to negotiate the difficulty.

In scripted drama, the negotiation has been thought out by the playwright, and the actor, having learned his lines, simply pretends to be a character who is suddenly confronted with the need to improvise, as if he were an actor. But in the commedia dell’arte, the actor improvises in direct view of the audience just as the character would in his own world. This is true of the spoken drama as well as scenic dance, though in the latter the degrees of freedom are more closely conditioned. Having accepted the physical limitations of the character, and having reconceived his body as the physical totality of the character’s abilities, he must perform that character’s response to the situation. In doing so, he displays acrobatic skill, and the focus of the audience is momentarily off the character and onto the performer, who steals the show, frequently performing beyond the requirements of the dramatic action. The scenario is a type of script that enables the character to
be inventive and to display his skill. Here the actor comes into such intimate contact with the character that the ontological lines of demarcation are momentarily blurred. This occurs particularly when the actor engages in a scene of acrobatic display, whether the plot demands it or not. We have in such cases the peculiar situation in which the character becomes the actor, rather than the actor the character.
The improvisation of the speech and stage business needed to represent a full dramatic action, in the conventional sense of a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, always begins with a scenario of some sort. It may be long or short, original or derived, but it must be there. The scenario is the necessary generative base of the improvised performance text. Without it, there would be a medley, variable and disordered, of independent fragments of drama but not a play. The performance would lack semiotic and artistic unity. The scenario is an instrument by means of which the members of the cast help themselves stay focused on their collaborative goal, avoiding tangential developments and yet claiming space for the display of artistic individualism and talent. It holds them back from pursuing spurious motifs and propels them forward after their single objective, which is the performance text of the play. The scenario enables the actors to work collectively in discharging a responsibility that is authorial as well as performative. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the creative function of the scenario in the actors’ management of the major aspects of improvisation, including personal displays of bravura in their performance of comic routines, their relationship with the audience that some of these imply, and their creation of dialogue on stage.

The scenario

From the perspective of play-development dramaturgy, whether the project is to write a play text or to produce a performance text by improvisation, it is important to ask whether the play makers start with an idea of the plot or an idea of the characters. Aristotle would have no hesitation in answering this question. In the Poetics (1455a34–1555b3), he observes that the maker
of the play, who in his case is a playwright, begins with the dramatic action, turns that into a plot, understood as a logical organization of the incidents that comprise it, finds characters who can figure as suitable agents of that action, and finally fills in the text in the form of dialogues, monologues, and choral songs. Renaissance Aristotelianism repeated the formula without significant variation. Giangiorgio Trissino, for example, in La quinta e la sesta divisione della poetica (1562) observes that playwrights “prima cercano la attione, e poi i costumi et i discorsi che vogliono imitare, et ultimamente legano le parole in versi da imitarle” (f. 8v). The compositional order is exactly the same: the action, the characters (costumi), the human interactions to be imitated (discorsi), and finally the verses needed to imitate them. Viewed against this background, the commedia dell’arte is not dissimilar from the Aristotelian dramaturgical project, except for the fact that the final composition is accomplished by improvisation directly on stage. Commedia dell’arte also begins with a plot understood as an effective organization of the incidents that constitute the dramatic action. The recorded outline of that plot is the commedia dell’arte scenario.

The title of the first published collection of scenarios in the commedia dell’arte tradition, Flaminio Scala’s Il teatro delle favole rappresentative (1611), translated into English as Scenarios of the Commedia dell’Arte, offers traces of formal link to Aristotelian dramaturgy in its use of the term favole as the key word for the reader’s focus. In the early seventeenth century, the term favola had various closely related meanings, but there can be no doubt that, in a theatrical context, it meant plot in the Aristotelian sense of the term, for Aristotle’s μῦθος was translated as Latin fabula. Besides, Scala himself, in his prologue to the play Il finto marito (1619), which he wrote by filling in the scenario with text in the manner just described, a fact that sheds much light on the type of dialogue improvised within the scenario form (Henke 2010, p. 195), echoes Aristotle when he observes that the action is the substance of a play.

Once the dramatic action has been determined, characters are selected because they can be suitable agents of it, but, in some segments of the action, most notably in comic routines, the characters could be easily replaced with other characters capable of exercising the same function—Arlecchino, for example, could be replaced by Pulcinella or Coviello without difficulty, as can be seen from collections of lazzì. In such cases, the identity of the characters is not necessary for the appreciation of the action. However, like the characters of ancient myth-based drama, the stock characters of the commedia dell’arte come with a wealth of associations and distinctive traits. These are all indications of the types of activities in which the characters can be logically placed and of the kinds of speeches they can improvise. Therefore, the addition of text, in the form of improvised performance, does not appear
to be a formidable difficulty. Given the types of things that such characters are likely to say and do in a particular episode of the main action, and given the guidelines in the scenario for the containment of the actors’ focus, the improvisation of dramaturgically appropriate performance text is not an intimidating matter for a well-trained actor. What may be daunting, however, is the prospect of having to produce performance text with aesthetic ambition. In a performance text improvised by great actors, observed once Evaristo Gherardi, the Arlecchino of the Comédie Italienne in Paris, in the introduction to his *Le Théâtre Italien* (1700), the audience should think that “it has all been prearranged” (Cole and Chinoy 1970, p. 58).

In some cases the process works so well that, after the performance, the author of the scenario tries to recapture its words and scenic action by writing them out in full as precisely as he can. In other cases the process remains fictional, the performance being only a methodical visualization by the author of the kinds of signifying structures that the members of a particular company might come up with if they were enacting the scenario by improvisation. The author then fills in the individual scenes of the scenario with material drawn from that fictional performance and produces a play text in the process. The process is eminently Aristotelian, for in the *Poetics* we read that the best way to write a play is for the playwright to visualize its performance in his imagination (1455a22). The function of the scenario with respect to the performers is not much different. The scenario enables the actor to visualize his role in the plot and to produce the verbal and gestural expressions that he needs to improvise his part of the text in concert with others. The visualization generated by the scenario empowers the actor while binding him by its logic. That is why Gherardi could observe that a good improvised performance seems all prearranged.

In the improvisation process, the scenario is indeed both restrictive and enabling. It is restrictive because for each incident of the plot, the actors are not free to choose the logic of their actions. The outcome of their actions must be the beginning of the following scene, as indicated in the scenario. The outcome is predetermined. In this sense, it may be useful to regard the scenario as a complex set of stage directions that indicate when actors enter the stage and, concisely, the sorts of things they should say and do once they are on it, leaving the actors free to choose how to articulate their anticipation of that outcome verbally and gesturally. And just as stage directions in a scripted play “limit the freedom of the actor and the director” (Gramsci 1985, p. 121), protecting the plot from excessive latitude of interpretation, in a scenario they protect the dramatic action from any temptation the actors may have to pursue independent development, throwing the plot into disorder. Restrictive functions of this kind are very positive, not only because they help the actors retain a clear grasp of their objective, but also because they put
them in a position to be more creative with less, asking them to find ways of showcasing their brilliance without putting at risk the roles of their fellow actors and the clarity of the play. Dramaturgical restrictions on action development at the scene level are similar to the restrictions of form in poetry: predetermined rhyme patterns, metrical schemes, and stanza length reduce the poet’s available vocabulary for his poem and compel him to be as creative as possible while remaining within the restrictive logic of his chosen form. Commedia dell’arte improvisers may be said to be in control of the scenario because they remain creative throughout the performance though they are bound by its plot outline. In improvising gestural and verbal text, the commedia actors stay within the boundaries of the scenario form in all scenes, but those same boundaries provoke them to be rationally creative.

One of the considerable advantages of rigid scenes, particularly short ones, is that they activate selective memory, enabling the actors to retrieve from experience and training only relevant material for rehandling in improvisation. The relationship between one scene and the other in the scenario articulates the syntagmatic structure of the performance text, while selective memory activates the paradigmatic materials available for improvisation. As far as individual signs are concerned, scene analysis represents a macro-level inspection of the performance text made possible by the scenario. The material for rehandling may be retrieved by the actors from similar scenes encountered in reading, observed in social life, practiced in training, or previously performed in other plays. The scenario structure enables a quick retrieval of material and a virtual guarantee of relevance. Comic routines of the expandable type, sequences whose duration can be adjusted at will during improvisation by means of repetition and minimal internal variation, indicate that, though rigid in its logic of development, the scenario does not impose firm limits of duration and tempo on the individual segments of improvised action. The freedom to stretch or compress a sequence can serve as a buffer against errors and moments of uncertainty that need to be covered up, “a safety-net” (Andrews 2008, p. xlv) for momentary lapses that would otherwise compromise the smoothness of the improvisation process.

For greater clarity, it is useful to distinguish between dramatic and stage action. Understood in its Aristotelian sense, dramatic action is the event whose imitation on paper is the plot of the play, on the basis of which we can imaginatively recreate it as an aesthetic object of contemplation. Stage action is a collective term for stage movement, gestures and acts performed in the improvisation of the performance text. Stage action is a means to an end, whereas dramatic action is the end. Dramatic action, as a conceptual unit, is established by the scenario, which furthermore breaks it down into separate incidents, each envisioned as articulated in a separate scene. It enters the improvisation process only teleologically, as the ultimate end by which
the logic of the play is governed. Scenic action, alongside verbal interaction and expression, is in the domain of the improvisers of the play, the material from which they fashion the stage realization of the dramatic action. In determining how to make use of this material within each scene, the actors are guided by the beginning of the following scene, which functions as a final cause that pulls the improvisation progress forward toward the end of the dramatic action. The scenario is a creative tool, an instrument that prompts the actors to improvise the play, enabling them to retrieve appropriate signifying structures from their memories and to bring them forth, with proper timing and in appropriate combinations, in the production of both meaning and art.

The concertatore

The custodianship of the company's artistic goal in improvising a play was entrusted to a figure about whom too little has been written, the company's concertatore. He was generally a senior member of the company whose function was partly analogous to that of the literary managers and dramaturgs in the modern theater, particularly in the sense that these terms have been acquiring in North America since approximately the turn of the twentieth century, and partly analogous to that of the classical choragus, or chorus leader, the ancient figure that, in its late Renaissance version (Migliarisi 2003, p. 121f), comes closest to the modern idea of a director. Laying out the plan for the improvised text, with references to the actors, the stage, the scenario, and some routines from the performance vocabulary of the members of the company—all of this is covered by the expression concertare il soggetto, in which the verb means to coordinate a plan by working in concert, while the noun refers to the outline of the play to be performed. In the late Renaissance, the verb concertare was applied also to the production of scripted drama, as we can see from Leone de' Sommi, who, in his Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche (1556), the first extensive European work on play direction, refers to a well coordinated play as a “cosa concertata” but calls “sconcertar lo spettacolo” (Sommi 1968, pp. 44 and 54) the idea that an inadequate performance can throw a whole production into disorder. When the expression concertare il soggetto is applied to a play in the commedia dell’arte tradition, it refers to a detailed plan for the improvisation of a performance text by a particular company. Such a plan is not generally preserved on paper but is delivered to the cast in the form of an oral instruction, in a sort of preparatory meeting in which the play as an objective to be reached in performance can be visualized collectively. A well coordinated performance plan is accepted by the cast as the starting point of their improvisation.
The two main sources on the responsibilities of the concertatore of improvised drama are Andrea Perrucci’s *Dell’arte rappresentativa* (1699) and Jean-Auguste Julien Des Boulmiers’s *Histoire anecdotique et raisonnée di théâtre italien* (1769). From the commentary offered by these two scholars, we can surmise that the concertatore was a performance coordinator responsible for the selection of the play to be performed, for its interpretation, for much of its production dramaturgy, and for the overall aesthetic vision of the performance as a whole. He studied the scenario, took stock of the special skills of each member of the company, made a list of the major plot-independent *lazzi* to be inserted into the outline, and prepared a detailed production plan. He then explained his plan to the company, offered an analysis of each of the characters, and made decisions concerning the set, the entrances and exits, the strategic deployment of *lazzi* and other stage business, monologues, and dialogues. “De lui dépend tout l’ensemble de la représentation” (Boulmiers 1769, p. 41). Working with his vision of the play, the actors improvise the text and perform the comic routines for which each of them is famous.

Boulmiers observed that the work of the production coordinator is especially significant in three cases: “L’orsqu’on doit jouer une pièce nouvelle, ou une de celles que l’on remet au théâtre, ou même lorsque la Troupe est composées d’acteurs qui n’ont pas ancure joué ensemble” (Boulmiers 1769, I, p. 41). The first two conditions concern the company’s lack of familiarity with the play itself, either because it is new to them or because they have lost memory of it. In these circumstances, the concertatore makes every effort to provide the troupe with all the information they need to begin improvising the text on stage. He goes as far as to tell them what sorts of things they should say in particular scenes. According to Perrucci, the coordinator explicates the plot also with a view to determine the best points for the performance of *lazzi*, saying to the company something like this: “Here we need such and such a *lazzo*, which is done like this” (Perrucci 2008, p. 195). Boulmiers adds that the concertatore has a plan for the distribution of *lazzi*, which he shares with all the members of the cast, explaining “la manière dont les lazis doivent se répondre les uns aux autres” (p. 41) in accordance with an organizing principle that may make that correspondence clear. His vision of the play as a finished product is the ideal by which their creativity must be guided. Every actor inevitably read the scenario from the perspective of the character that he impersonated, and so it was not possible for any member of the company to visualize objectively the contribution that all other members of the cast needed to make in order to bring about the transformation of the plot into a coherent play, the concertatore acted as the keeper of their collective sense of purpose in their collaborative creation of the performance text. His plan included an artistic vision of the dramatic action as a whole and the production values that the company meant to reach in performing it.
It also included pitfalls to be avoided, stumbling blocks of which actors susceptible to distraction needed to be aware before stepping on the stage. Ideally, the actors were all highly skilled, but performing plays without rehearsals and by improvisation is no easy matter, and even talented players can experience lapses of concentration. When they are performing a new play, or when they find themselves in an unfamiliar character configuration, they may momentarily forget such things as a name, or the door on which they should knock when the set includes several doors. Such mistakes are easy to make by an actor who is concentrating on improvising verbal and gestural dialogue, and can quickly put the smooth flow of the scene at risk, creating improvisational difficulties for the other actors on stage and generating confusion in the audience. The concertatore forewarns the actors that such failures of memory are always a possibility in improvisational drama and reminds them to focus on details, including the name of the city in which the action took place. Since it was conventional to mention at an appropriate place in the text the name of the city in which the actors were performing the play, and since itinerant companies performed the same play in different locations, an error of this type might be somewhat embarrassing. Improvisation requires a disciplined and focused mind. And the focus must be on the play as a collaborative work. Without such attention to collaboration, it may be that an actor who does not stay on stage long enough for the audience to see the other character arrive, and the play as a whole suffers. A lapse of memory may go unnoticed or may be forgiven, but not when actors, in undisciplined improvisation, use the wrong names, walk into the wrong houses, or leave the stage empty. For Boulmiers, such insufficient command of the craft of improvisational acting “produit dans la représentation un manque de liaison et d’ensemble, dont toute la pièce souffre beaucoup” (Boulmiers 1769, p. 41).

Perrucci is rather more direct. Forgetting a name, a character’s address, or leaving the stage deserted—these, he says, “are the actions of fools” (Perrucci 2008, p. 199), leaving no doubt that for him a concertatore worth his salt will take such “nonartistic” responsibilities very seriously. The concertatore reviews the plot also to ensure smooth traffic on stage. A standard practice of the time was to use the upstage wings for entrances and the downstage ones for exits. This was a simple convention that prevented exiting and entering actors from clashing into each other at the same door. But this rule was obviously not followed by everyone and would, in any case, have been impractical in some plays. The consequence must have been frequent episodes of embarrassing clashes. The coordinator reminds his actors of this potential pitfall, telling them, however, that, unlike an actor of scripted drama, who must leave the performance space as soon as he has finished his scene, quite simply because he has nothing else to say, a player of unscripted drama can and should continue to improvise on the same topic without changing the plot, giving
himself enough time to find out at what entrance the actor who is about to enter is waiting for his cue so that he may exit through another entrance. The same principle applies to situations in which the stage would be left deserted if the incoming actor is not quite ready to enter. The exiting actor can continue to improvise, stretching out the scene until his fellow actor arrives on stage.

This was not always a matter of saying a word or two to alert an actor in the wings. At times the actor needed to prolong his scene with a complex monologue and appropriate actions, and this required great ability to react constructively to the situation. An extempore actor, says Carlo Gozzi in his Memoires, “ought never to lose presence of mind, or to be at a loss for material” (Gozzi 1890, p. 268). He illustrates his point with an episode from his own experience as a young actor on the stage of the Court Theatre of the Dalmatian city of Zara in the late 1730s. He was impersonating Luce, a Dalmatian adaptation of the commedia dell’arte maid, singing a lullaby to her restless baby while she waited for her husband, the old and debauched Pantalone, to return home. But Antonio Zeno, who played Pantalone, was nowhere near the wings and in fact had stepped out of the theater. Gozzi was forced to prolong the scene for quite some time, until Zeno made his appearance at his designated entrance point. Gozzi improvised a long scene in which Luce started breast feeding her baby girl, reacted physically and verbally to the fact the baby bit her mother’s nipples, went on and on about how soon she would become a young lady, talked at length about her manners and education, gave her the name of a notorious lady friend in the audience and, while overtly describing Luce’s fantasy of her grown up daughter, made frequent satirical allusions to the woman in the theater, and so on and so forth, to roaring laughter and applause. In the process, Gozzi expressed a wide range of emotions, from mock anxiety to joy, and constructed a narrative episode fully coherent with the scenario, though unforeseen in it, and potentially prolonged at will until his fellow actor appeared in the wings. Reacting constructively to a crisis of this nature presupposes a state of readiness that includes a large quantity of material (narrative, verbal, and gestural), all of which can be enriched and prolonged without altering the plot onto which it is grafted and without straying from the thematic compass of the scenario. In a professional production, the task of reminding the actors that on stage they must always be in a state of readiness for such an eventuality falls to the company’s concertatore.

A unique dramaturgical aspect of the concertatore’s plan is the way the performance text communicates to the audience that a given scene takes place in daylight or in the dark. Prior to the invention of lighting systems more sophisticated than torches and candles, the representation of night and day could not be effected iconically by darkening the stage. The improvisational theater flourished in an age in which the textual time of day had to be indicated by the actors, verbally or gesturally. Having determined the transition points
between light and darkness in the scenario, the concertatore asks the exiting actor to say something indicating that night is falling, or that dawn is approaching, or that day is breaking (Perrucci 2008, p. 196). Such verbal signs of transition remind the incoming actor that he is walking into a scene of different luminosity and must adjust his gestural and verbal behavior accordingly. As the signified textual reality, darkness is the condition in which the characters move in their own imaginary domain. Its stage signifiers are words, gestures, and scenic movements performed by the actor as if he were moving in the dark. Darkness is a semiotic function of performance. By improvising language and movement in a semiotically appropriate way, the actors create signifiers of darkness on stage, which in turn indicates darkness in the text. The same principle is valid for the twilight of dusk and dawn. In an evenly lit theater, or in an outside performance, darkness and partial darkness are signified by acting and stage properties, such as lit candles. The light from candles must be used when actors need to perform actions in the dark that are part of the dramatic narrative, such as reading a letter at night. Perrucci warns the actors not to use for this purpose the lights that illuminate the stage and the auditorium, for those lights should be regarded as nonexistent. In acting, movement is construed as an indexical sign of the reduced light available to the performer. Light-generating properties, on the other hand, are conceived as symbolic signifiers, grounded in an ironic principle of signification, for they use stage light to indicate textual darkness.

Acting within the restrictions of the concertatore's plan, and working in concert with one another, the actors play out their scenes, improvising dialogues and speeches using materials from their individual repertoires. They may reuse generic materials, previously learned or employed in other plays, the kinds of signifying actions or formulas suitable for situations that recur in all types of actions. If they use such materials, they must be careful not to introduce elements inconsistent with the coordinated performance plan, for that could easily generate confusion, compromising the aesthetic success of the play. The actors may improvise something specific for that particular play, mentioning narrative details and themes from its plot. But even in such cases, they should be careful not to venture too far from the main theme of the scene or else they might find it difficult to get back on track. The actors' creativity must at all times be in alignment with the concertatore's production plan.

Lazzi

The risk of undermining the coherence of the production is highest when the performance includes elaborate lazzi. The temptation to stretch out a good lazzo, prompted by favorable audience reaction, or to develop it in a way
suggestive of themes distant from the scenario, must be contained as much as possible. The success of a commedia dell’arte company in establishing the artistic merits of unscripted drama depended both on the appeal of their scenarios and on the entertainment value of their bravura pieces. Striking the right dramaturgical balance must have been a particularly challenging task for a concertatore. The audience appeal of lazzi gave them a high entertainment value, but their artistic management from the perspective of plot integrity is not an easy matter. The difficulty is due entirely to their independence from the syntagmatic plane of discourse. The semiotic coherence of a linear arrangement of words and actions in performance and the artistic appeal of the story that they tell are based on a careful control of potentially disruptive intrusions from the paradigmatic plane. From a syntagmatic perspective, lazzi have a built-in disruptive potential: they are not normally subject to the laws of causality on which the represented dramatic action rests, and they are not required for the construction of narrative meaning on the syntagmatic plane.

In his description of some of the most well-known comic routines in the repertoire, Mel Gordon observes that lazzi are discrete, independent, and repeatable units of stage action (Gordon 1983, p. 5). These three adjectives are a good starting point for a reflection on the formal aspects of lazzi and on their dramaturgical relationship to the scenario. Being sophisticated objects of improvisation, individual lazzi can vary from one performance to the next, but in their variation they will always retain their discrete nature: externally, they are logically detached from the line of textual development indicated in the scenario, and, internally, they preserve their semiotic distinctiveness. In general, their stage business concerns hunger, sex, loquaciousness, acrobatics, and other themes in which the characters can display the defining features of their type. Several characters, however, belong to the same type and can have similar functional roles. Consequently, physical lazzi originally developed as elements of the semiotic repertoire for Arlecchino, for example, can just as easily be improvised by Coviello, who frequently has an analogous thematic interest and is endowed with the required agility, but not, say, by the aged Pantalone, at least not unless the performance has an intra-textual parodic intent.

The fact that lazzi are independent units of stage action means that they do not have a necessary relationship to the plot. In this respect, they are rather like arie di baule in opera, insertion arias that could be incorporated into any opera of the same general type. Such arias do not have an intrinsic relationship to the nature of a particular dramatic action and can therefore be transferred from one production to the other without difficulty. Something analogous is true of comic routines of the improvised theater. The concertatore is there to make sure that the insertion point for a particular routine is such
as not to disrupt the logic of the play with independent improvisation. During the performance of an elaborate lazio, the focus of the audience’s field of perception is on the comic skill of the performer and on the signifying structure of the stage action that he performs. That structure, however, does not send the mind back to the syntagmatic chain of events in the scenario in order to complete the signification process. The lazzi are enacted by the same characters that propel the plot of the performance text, and normally partake of the mood of the scenario scene into which they are brought by individual actors. Their manner of signification, however, is less relational and more self-contained than other actions performed by the actors in the causal progression of the plot. The semiosis of lazzi sends the minds of the spectators to the domain of other comic lazzi that figure in their theatrical memory, which are a measure of their familiarity with the world of commedia dell’arte improvisation. For spectators with a low level of “literacy,” the scenic action of a lazio, which is to say, its actual performance, may well figure as a part of the dramatic action being represented, with the consequence that it appears incoherently structured, disjointed, and devoid of any discernible internal logic. For the connoisseur, however, the dramatic action represented by the plot in the scenario is not dissimilar from that of plays in the scripted tradition. This is because most of its lazzi are not meant to be perceived as signs of the play’s dramatic action. The referents of the lazzi being performed on stage are not found in the same realm as those of the narrative, nor do they have to be in the material or temporal proximity of the other lazzi with which they are associated. Lazzi do not have a syntagmatic role, though they appear in sequence in the field of perception. They are paradigmatic signifying structures that have no need for syntagmatic contextualization in order to achieve their aesthetic and semiotic end. They do not have to be in sequence with other material signs in order to establish meaning because their meaning is not dependent on what precedes or follows them in the audience’s field of perception. As paradigmatic signs, they work in absentia of the other signs to which they are related (Saussure 1959, p. 123). Their realm of associative activity is the audience’s imagination, and the signs to which they allude are other lazzi present only mnemonically. They emerge in consciousness as comparanda for the one just witnessed. Successful lazzi refocus the attention of the spectators temporarily away from the syntagmatic plane of the performance and onto the paradigm of lazzi that have analogous structural elements in the spectators’ theatrical memory.

Such refocusing may obfuscate the logical structure of the work if the lazio is in the wrong place. The company’s concertatore therefore indicates the insertion points in his production plan in order to protect the linear integrity of the production in the audience’s field of perception. The concertatore is concerned with the syntagmatic axis of the play, namely, with the arrangement
of its episodes according to the logic of comic causality. He cannot have as much to say about the paradigmatic axis, which is entirely in the hands of the performers as their privileged domain of improvisation. Yet it is clear that, in situating *lazzi* in particular contexts, the *concertatore* is also aware of the fact that the final performance text can include these great numbers and aims to come up with a plan for them. When Boulmiers says that in the commedia dell’arte tradition, the *lazzi* were usually inserted where the audience would make a connection between them (“doivent se répondre les uns aux autres”), he comes pretty close to speaking of the *lazzi* plot as intertwined with the dramatic plot outlined in the scenario. *Lazzi* interrupt the audience’s experience of the dramatic plot development, displacing from the field of perception their sense of textual time and place as well as its characters. If the *lazzi* are well placed in the scenario by the *concertatore*, however, the interruption can occur without causing discernible discontinuity. Consequently, the audience retains a sense of the whole while experiencing an impressive episode of plot-independent improvisation.

Conventional scenarios do not reveal much information about the role of *lazzi* because the latter precede the performance. But scenarios that have been scripted as full plays after memorable performances that include *lazzi* may well provide us with a reliable point of access to the role of *lazzi* in a play. An excellent example of such a scripting is *The Servant of Two Masters*, composed as a scenario by Goldoni in 1745 for the company of Antonio Sacchi. It consisted of a general outline of the plot and character relations, with a few scripted scenes for the serious roles, that is to say, the lovers, in accordance with a generally accepted formula for the composition of scenarios in the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century. The plot was conceived by Goldoni along the lines of the Aristotelian tradition: it had, he says, a complication, a change of fortune, and a catastrophe. It was superbly improvised in 1747 with Sacchi in the role of Truffaldino, and finally it was scripted by the playwright in 1753, following, as closely as possible, the performance text of Sacchi’s troupe. The most memorable moments of the play are the long *lazzi* originally improvised by Sacchi, which Goldoni incorporated as brief scenes into the scripted play. When we read the script regressively, trying to recreate the scenario that it presupposes, we find that the isolated *lazzi* performed by Truffaldino can be cut without damage to the logic of the dramatic action. This is what Goldoni must have had in mind when, in his epistle dedicatory, he stated that, except for the episode in which Truffaldino manages to get temporarily out of trouble by saying to each of his two masters that the other is dead, “the play could be staged without him” (Goldoni 1996, p. 97). The dramatic action, in fact, does not revolve around Truffaldino. Therefore, if we were to do precisely that, we should be able to separate the *lazzi* plot from the original drama plot. Such an operation
would confirm the conclusion that the *lazzi* were insertions, placed where they do not interfere with the plot.

In the *lazzo* reproduced in scene I.14 of *The Servant of Two Masters*, Truffaldino is on his way to deliver a letter, previously opened, to one of his masters, and on his way he stops to seal it. The *lazzo* consists of a series of actions with running commentary in which Truffaldino chews bread in order to make some paste with which to seal the folded sheet of paper, but he inadvertently swallows it. Though Goldoni was writing in the middle of the eighteenth century, Truffaldino’s proverbial hunger is still in the substratum of his behavior. Truffaldino is basically unable to resist the temptation to eat the bread that is already in his mouth. He tries again and again always with the same result. Finally, with great effort and contortion, fighting against his own body, he manages to pull out the bread between his teeth and uses it to seal the letter. In the running commentary, he describes the details of the action that he is performing, mentions that he learned from his grandmother how to seal letters with bread, that it hurts him to waste bread this way, that it is against his nature to pull bread out of his mouth, and finally congratulates himself for being so clever. Once the letter is sealed, the plot is resumed.

It is clear from this example that, though the *lazzo* has nothing to do with the dramatic action and is unrelated to the plot, the insertion point was carefully chosen not to cause a sense of discontinuity. Truffaldino’s unsuccessful attempt to pull bread out of his own mouth is a repeatable action that, if the performance conditions warrant it, can be replicated many times, turning the *lazzo* into an elastic gag susceptible of extension and variations. In one such variation, Truffaldino ties the bread with a piece of string, so that he can retrieve it from his stomach, cleverly defeating his hunger. Its relationship with the scenario remains unchanged. The *lazzo* can be performed with a modified commentary and by introducing different ways in which Truffaldino can wrestle with his body or defeat his urge to swallow the bread, depending on his biomechanical dexterity and his power of invention.

Sacchi was for Goldoni the ideal comic actor, so much so that he did not hesitate to say that, in the research that he had to carry out in order to come up with good comic roles for his scripted plays, he could do no better than to study the nuances of Sacchi’s performances (Goldoni 1996, p. 97). But he realized that other actors, with different skills and a different creative imagination, might measure up to the character of Truffaldino in a totally different way. The actor performing the role of Truffaldino, Goldoni believed, should not feel obliged to perform it as scripted in the published text, but should rather feel free to improvise it, provided, of course, that he has the ability to do so. That is why Goldoni took the trouble to write
it out in full. He wanted to clarify his intention and direct the actor to his objective by offering him the example of a successful improvisation (Goldoni 1996, pp. 98–99). The scripted version, describing as it does only Sacchi’s interpretation of the character, is offered only as a guide to a performance type of proven success and admired by the author, but not as a prescribed performance.

Addressing the audience

In an engaging scene of *The Comic Theatre*, Goldoni, speaking as Orazio, the actor manager of the company rehearsing a play, discusses the relationship between commedia players and the audience. He has this brief exchange with the scenario writer Lelio:

**ORAZIO:** Don’t you understand that one simply cannot speak to the audience? When an actor’s alone on stage he must suppose that he is neither heard nor seen. Addressing the audience is an insufferable habit, and should never be permitted.

**LELIO:** But this is the way nearly all actors improvise.

(Goldoni 1969, p. 61)

Goldoni was writing in 1750, when the movement toward realism was still discussed in the restrictive terms of verisimilitude. Eventually it led to the establishment of illusionism as an incontrovertible principle of stage logic and aesthetics, but that was still in the future. However, already in 1750 the usual practice of improvising text addressed to the audience was beginning to appear uncomfortably disruptive of the dramatic logic of signification and of the ideal purpose of art, which was to create worlds related to reality by credible analogy and resemblance. The actor who routinely spoke to and with the audience in unscripted drama seemed to obey a logic of signification different from that of verisimilitude and to be guided by independent aesthetic principles. There is no discernible evidence within that aesthetic that, by ignoring the architectural discontinuity between the stage and the auditorium, commedia dell’arte actors were intentionally crossing a forbidden boundary. The invisible fourth wall of naturalist drama had not yet been erected. Speaking to and with the audience at convenient points of the plot was the norm rather than the exception.

The semiotic space of the theater, prior to the erection of the invisible wall, did have a proscenium arch separating the stage from the auditorium. But the proscenium was not yet the frame of an invisible wall, and so, while
indicating ontological difference, it did not prevent or discourage mutual acknowledgment and contact between actors and audience. The possibility of acknowledging the audience's role as group of people waiting to be entertained could be turned by an actor into an occasion for metatheatrical reflection. In a delightful lazio from the early eighteenth century, Arlecchino pretends to be an actor playing the role of Arlecchino in a scripted play (Gordon 1983, p. 42). He recites a joke, addressing it directly to the audience, in such a way as not to elicit any reaction. After repeating the joke to the same failed effect, he begins to suspect that his memory fails him, and so he pulls out the script that he had concealed in his sleeve, and recites the joke by reading it directly from the script, again to no noticeable effect. At that point he throws away the script, infuriates against the playwright, and declares that henceforth he will improvise his own jokes.

In addition to reclaiming the superiority of improvisation, this comic routine illustrates that the semiotic universe within which the performers of illusionist theater move is different from, and much more contained than, the one available to actors of the improvised drama, since the latter can include the audience's response to the performance. In the lazio just described, Arlecchino manages to make use of the audience's unresponsiveness to secure their collusive support. A major implication of lazzis of this nature is that the principle of opposition on which the semiosis of illusionist theater is based, namely, the dialectic between the reality of the audience and the unreality of the characters, is not an adequate tool for a description of the improvised theater. The semiosphere of improvisation includes, among other things, the possibility of crossing the line of demarcation between stage and auditorium frequently and almost effortlessly. The ease with which such crossing can occur is due to the fact that the two domains are not perceived as opposites. Using language made famous by Benedetto Croce, we could say that stage and hall are the end points of a dialectic of distincts rather than polarities of a dialectic of opposites. One is distinct from the other, the way green is distinct from yellow, but opposite to the other, as black is to white or as negative is to positive. In the improvised theater, the hall is not the domain of invisible voyeurs, but of spectators, that is of human beings who have come there in order to be spectators, and whose very existence as spectators is dependent upon the presence on stage of characters endowed with the awareness of being in front of spectators.

Crossing the borderline projected by the proscenium arch onto the stage floor is the commedia dell’arte equivalent of ancient parabasis. In Aristophanic comedy, parabasis was an occasion in which the chorus could address the audience directly when the characters had all left the stage. The semiotic universe of improvised theater includes the expressive conventions of parabasis as an ordinary transition from the logic of behavior that dominates the stage
to the logic of behavior that dominates the auditorium, and vice versa. In the commedia dell’arte, the performer can address the audience without giving rise to discontinuities in the performance text because the scenarios were such as to allow the insertion of *lazzi* of all kinds at virtually any point of the plot, there being no serious restrictions of uniformity and verisimilitude. Parabatic improvisation could have various degrees of complexity, from a simple gesture to an elaborate scene. Consider two *lazzi* in Pulcinella’s repertoire. In the first (Gordon 1983, p. 41), Pulcinella, having been killed, lies in a coffin, but periodically rises to reassure the audience that he is still breathing. In the second (Gordon 1983, p. 42), Pulcinella walks onto the stage, and, believing that the audience has not yet been allowed into the auditorium, turns toward the back wall of the stage and begins to urinate, when his wife comes in to tell him that the audience is already there and has seen him.

One might be tempted to say that, in the first of these *lazzi*, in parabatic fashion, the performer who impersonates Pulcinella steps out of character every time that he judges it appropriate and speaks to the audience in *propria persona*. Such an interpretation, however, would be conditioned too heavily by the logic of comic verisimilitude, for the actor is surely the one who is not dead. In fact, the semiotic situation is a little more complex. It is not the actor who steps out of character, but Pulcinella, whose imaginary ontological base is not grounded in verisimilitude. His death is never analogous to the death of a human being, simply because, in a grand display of illogicality, he dies without ceasing to be alive. The fact that he can be both dead and alive presents enormous possibilities for improvisation, both gestural and verbal. Signifying structures that are not limited by the rules of verisimilitude are not confined to logical semiotic relationships, which they can, in fact, ridicule, just as they ridicule the scripted tradition that is based on them.

In the second *lazzo*, the parabatic content is entirely verisimilar, to show that, although commedia improvisation is not limited by the laws of verisimilitude, it can include verisimilitude in its semiosphere. Pulcinella’s rustic and plebeian nature is a sufficient premise for his gesture of urination in a place he believes to be deserted. When she acknowledges the presence of the audience, Pulcinella’s wife offers a sufficient premise for his embarrassment and for the gestural manner in which he conveys his state of mind. The second part of the *lazzo* calls for sophisticated gestural signifiers of embarrassment; it is an opportunity for brilliant actors to prolong the scene with virtuosic skill. Among other things, by his parabatic *lazzo* he invites the audience to disregard conventional and extra-artistic principles of decorum. From a semiotic point of view, such parabatic acts serve the function of reaffirming the validity of visually unappealing material in the domain of theatrical art. By his act, Pulcinella prompts the spectators to admit visual signs of socially unacceptable behavior into their purview of the theatrical
code. The referential range of the visual code of commedia players is more audacious than that of scripted literary plays, which generally relegate scatology to the verbal code.

The employment of striking motifs in parabatic lazzis calls the attention of the spectators to the peculiar nature of the genre to which the play belongs. Among the most interesting from a semiotic point of view are the lazzis that call attention to various aspects of the production process. For example, there is a lazzo in which Zanni and Graziano call a meeting of the other characters so that they can decide what play to put on next (Capozza 2006, p. 57), another in which Pulcinella is making a poster to advertise the play in which he is to perform (Capozza 2006, p. 54), and a rather prolonged one in which Pantalone and Zanni ask the Captain for his suit of clothes for Pantalone to use as a costume in a play about him. The Captain punctuates this last lazzo with brief lazzis of his own and concludes by teaching Pantalone enough Spanish so that he may begin improvising in that language (Capozza 2006, p. 68). Upon a first reading, such lazzis may appear as quite ordinary with nothing especially striking about them, so accustomed are we to the idea that great commedia actors are inseparable from the characters that they impersonate. But in actual practice, they are anything but ordinary. Their semiotic structure is exceedingly complex and the type of acting they require is equally sophisticated. For in these lazzis, the commedia dell’arte characters named are performing the roles of actors who are supposed to impersonate them in the plays they are about to stage. The signs that they use come directly from their individual repertoires, but the manner in which they perform them must reveal the different layers of impersonation that the lazzis involve. In the costume lazzo, the actor who impersonates Pantalone must actually impersonate him in the act of pretending to be an actor rehearsing the role of the Captain. In the other lazzis, in which the actors impersonate characters who pretend to be the actors getting ready to impersonate the characters, the semiotic process involves a complex game of mirrors in which signifiers and signified are conceptually superimposed, delightfully entrapping the mind of the attentive spectators in the manner of great art.

In other parabatic lazzis, the focus is on the audience and on the improvisation process itself. Consider, for example, a lazzo from seventeenth-century Florence designed to interrupt a performance in progress (Gordon 1983, p. 41). A few actors emerge from the wings and go into the auditorium, mingling with the spectators. And from their new positions, they begin to yell all sorts of irrelevant things, improvised on the spot and directed principally at the actors on stage but, inevitably, also at the audience in front of and around them. The apparent purpose of such actions was to interrupt the performance for a while, causing the actors on stage to respond to them rather than to proceed with their planned business. But their real purpose was to enrich
the show with their improvisations. The effect of their transfer into the space occupied by the audience, which they could use as playing area for their roles as disruptors, was to move to the back of the auditorium the borderline at the base of the proscenium arch. By this move they expanded the stage so much as to include everyone in the auditorium into the playing area, effectively transforming the paying public into performers impersonating the role of spectators caught in a momentary farcical disturbance. The entire room thus becomes a stage, abolishing the ontological distinction between playing area and auditorium on the one hand, and between the performers and audience on the other, until the normal rhythm of the performance could be reestablished. In the meantime, the pragmatic dynamics of the situation have been changed, forcing the audience to assume a productive role in addition to their receptive one. What is more, the disruption provokes the audience into assuming the role of improvisers, for they too would have to react without following a script. And at that point, the only thing that is disrupted is our original distinction between fiction and reality.

**Dialogue**

Dialogue among the characters belongs to the part of the performance that refocuses the physical attention of the spectators onto the actors on stage and on the way they keep the story moving forward by improvisation. The actors involved in a dialogical scene store in their imaginations everything they can from their reading of the scenario, treating the scene as if it were a miniature play, with its introduction, problem and resolution, and concentrating on every detail of its structure and theme as well as on every aspect of the emotions experienced by the characters. This is how they achieve their state of readiness for improvisation, enabling themselves to imagine how they can produce dialogue by improvisation. When they find themselves on stage engaged in dialogue, however, they need to react to each other and inevitably produce something different from what they had imagined in their respective preparatory considerations. It is this newness, partly discovered by the actors in the process of producing it, that lends impromptu dialogue a liveliness of flow and a naturalness of tone that are difficult to match in the recitation of written script, with its unavoidable traces of literariness.

Reflecting on the situation of impromptu actors about to engage in dialogue, Boulmiers observes that each scene comes to them with a performance tradition. The most popular comedies in the repertoire, in fact, are all plays that over the years have been performed by many different actors. That performance legacy is available to the actors as well as the audience as part of their theater culture. The performance tradition has an impact on the audience, raising
performance expectations in them, with respect to content as well as skill, and on the actors, to whom it makes available a rich performance vocabulary of proven success. The actors are thereby able to give their performance text the “esprit bien vif” of their personal creativity, simultaneously displaying its conscious degree of alignment with the theatrical tradition.

This incorporation of the theatrical tradition into the analysis of impromptu acting argues for a pragmatic dramaturgy of unscripted dialogue. Such a dramaturgy pays attention to the rules of form that must be obeyed in the creation of dialogue and considers the semiotic material to which they are applied in terms of intentional communication with the audience. The communication is to be achieved by each actor without undermining the work of the other, while both elicit a sign of the audience’s appreciation of the performance for its artistic merits. The main principle of a pragmatic dramaturgy of improvised dialogue is that the actors must resist the temptation to upstage each other with impressive speeches, turning collaboration into competition, for the sake of applause. To compete with a dialogue partner would be tantamount to courting disaster. Dialogue is not a pretext for bravura performances designed to make the actor emerge as a star. The actors’ state of engagement readiness in the improvisation of dialogue must include the humility to recognize that dialogical improvisation is an act of service “à l’harmonie totale de la représentation” (Boulmiers 1769, p. 40).

Such service is not possible without awareness and acceptance of the fundamental principle of the dramaturgy of impromptu dialogue: that the actor must know the severe limitations imposed on his creativity by the dialogical form itself. The first of these limitations in order of significance is that dialogue requires actors to speak only when necessary and for no longer than is necessary, each being fully aware of the required length of his contribution to the dialogue. This requirement is the “mesure exacte du loquacité” by which he must be guided at all times throughout the scene. Beyond that exact measure, there is only disorder and confusion. New actors are especially susceptible to two errors of judgment, which may cause them to forget the structural limitations of dialogue. The first error is the belief that talkativeness is a potential indication of talent in impromptu acting, and the second is the conviction that everything that they believe their character might say in such a situation is important and cannot be left out of the dialogue without compromising the value of the scene. The first error derives from disregard for the dialogical form, which requires the other actor or actors on stage to contribute to the development of the scene, each in proportion to the proximity of his role to the theme of the conversation. The second is a form of self-centeredness which induces the actor to believe that everything that he would have to say, if he had the opportunity, is as important to the dialogue as it is to him personally. These errors can cause
actors to say all sorts of irrelevant and unnecessary things, damaging the artistic integrity of the dialogue.

To avoid giving the impression of garrulousness, the actor must appreciate the dramaturgical function of silence in improvised dialogue. Silence is an absolute necessity at certain points in the collaborative construction of a meaningful dialogue of artistic merit. The only instances in which this rule has no validity are the verbal tirades of the Dottore, which are meant to signify his interminable loquaciousness and the virtual impossibility of interrupting him in the course of his speech. But in all other cases, a good impromptu actor will know how to distinguish “les instants faits pour le silence ou pour la parole” (Boulmier 1769, p. 37). In silent moments, he listens attentively to the other actor and may respond gesturally to what he hears. Both actors must be cognizant of the semiotic and artistic value of the silence of one of them in their collaborative effort to develop dialogical text. In unscripted drama, being able to speak coherent text is a sine qua non of the art, but knowing when to stop speaking is “la plus grande qualité que puisse avoir celui qui joue à l’imromptu” (Boulmiers 1769, p. 38). For an actor, listening is not a form of passive behavior, the result of not acting. It is, rather, a performative activity, one that he performs at certain intervals in the dialogical development of the scene while another actor performs by speaking. The silence of one actor is synchronous with the speech of the other. The signifying structure of the performance text at that particular point includes both activities. If everyone talks at the same time, the scene becomes a cacophony of voices, unintelligible and inartistic.

The dramaturgy of dialogue further requires understanding the level of tension and the emotional focus of the scene about to be improvised. In scenes characterized by a low level of tension and little emotion, the construction of dialogue by improvisation requires longer speeches alternating with longer periods of silence from each contributing actor. Scenes of calmness are episodes in which ideas are brought forth, and since the characters have to make known their thoughts, which would not otherwise be accessible to the audience, they need the opportunity to express them intelligibly. Everyone present on stage should be made aware of the fact that the length of individual contributions should be governed by the number of characters on stage: “plus il y a d’acteurs sur la scène tous intéressés au moment, plus on doit être laconique dans ses discours” (Boulmiers 1769, p. 39). The error to avoid is the conviction that what one has to say is more important or more delightful for the audience to hear than what others have to contribute. In scenes with four or five characters, the frequency with which each actor joins the dialogue and the length of his speeches are both proportional to the relevance of the idea content of the scene to his particular role in the dramatic action. Characters central to the idea will lead the dialogue with speeches that are more frequent
and relatively longer than those of the others. Characters whose function is marginal can interject the odd word now and then and remain silent the rest of the time. Improvisation leads to the construction of a semiotically and artistically successful dialogue only if the members of the ensemble position themselves in perfect correlation with the conceptual content of the scene in the scenario.

In scenes characterized by tension and strong emotions, the fundamental dramaturgical idea is that one character experiences an emotion more intensely than the others and acts under its influence. The others may also be prompted by the same emotion to express themselves and to act in a particular way, but to a lesser degree. The actor whose character is most deeply affected by the emotion in question must lead the development of the dialogue and must be allowed by the other actors to dominate the scene with longer segments of dialogue. He must be regarded as “le maître de la scène” (Boulmiers 1769, p. 38). In their improvisations, the other actors must allow him to direct them from the inside as the scene develops. He in turn must allow the other actors to interrupt him with brief comments, on the principle that the interruption of an emotional speech has considerable pragmatic value, in that it confers to the scene an air of spontaneity that the audience is likely to appreciate. Such interruptions, however, must be brief enough not to allow the emotional state of the leading character to become weak and dissolve away before the tension of the scene reaches its logical resolution. All the actors on stage have something to contribute to that resolution, but their contribution must be subordinated to that of the main actor both in length and relevance.

Whether it deals with the calmness of ideas or the agitation of emotions, the improvisation of staged dialogue is a vastly interesting subject because it involves a double encounter: an encounter between the characters, who understand each other to be involved in conversation, and one between the actors, who relate to each other as coworkers engaged in the same pursuit. The characters communicate with each other without knowing the outcome of their conversation, which they improvise as they move along. They offer each other information, paraphrase each other, and ask each other questions, verbally and gesturally, realizing their creativity by building up the conversation upon each other’s utterances. Being artificial entities analogous to human beings, they bring their past into their conversation, as is inevitable in all authentic dialogue situations (Ott 1967, p. 23)—their immediate past, consciously, in order to make a point by means of references to things they have done; their distant past, unwittingly, by using the language with which they have evolved in the theatrical tradition, displaying their vernacular and their stylistic register almost as verbal equivalents of their costumes. This is what and who they are, visually and verbally, and they communicate accordingly.
The encounter between the actors is quite different. They communicate with each other with complete awareness of the outcome of their exchange, for that is already established in the scenario and in the concertatore’s production plan. They bring in their past only in the form of their training and experience, which are discernible from the way they use their characters’ language. They also bring in the performance tradition, through such techniques as allusion and citation, both ultimately forms of appropriation through which the actors declare the derivative aspect of their identity as artists of the stage. Their encounter is creative, since they do not repeat scripted lines but construct dialogue by impromptu responses to each other’s language, both physical and verbal. The phenomenology of dialogue teaches us that an exchange process is creative when it subjects initial thoughts to transformation, as a result of a teleology for the reaffirmation of the same thought in a new form that is built into the process itself (Ott 1967, p. 31).

In the performance of a scripted text, stage dialogue is artificial, and so transformation can occur only to the extent that voice and gesture can modify the meaning of preconceived words. But in impromptu performance, stage dialogue is authentic, and so transformation can occur at all levels, because the ideas for the affirmation of which it is constructed are subject to the transformative action of the teleology that is inherent in all dialogues: that at the end of the process, the thought that was the starting point can be restated in a clearer and more complete form.
It is safe to assume that audiences of the early commercial theater, whether of improvised or scripted drama, did not include in their midst many spectators moved by the urge to read the script or the scenario, either before or after the performance. But they did include a few people that wanted to form an opinion on the material that preexisted the performance as well as on the performance itself, and they were exceedingly careful readers of play texts. These were representatives of the board of censors, who routinely carried out “close readings” of the play texts, paying attention to every word and seeking out evidence of doctrinal and ideological deviance that could be passed on to the authorities for formal investigations, hearings, and trials. If they had access to the script and discerned in it evidence or intention of wrongdoing, they could prevent a performance from taking place. When the script was judged to be harmless, the performance was allowed, but if the play was then made much less innocent by clever gestural and vocal improvisation, it was turned in for criminal investigation. Producers and actors that ignored injunction, proceeding to performance nonetheless, were bound to find themselves in serious difficulty. The proceedings of the trial of the production team of the tragicomedy known as Il Caprino are a sufficient example of the degree of rigor and precision with which the authorities sought evidence of crime against the state, society, and the Church in the verbal as well as the visual codes of the performance text. As we read in the letter of denunciation, the play could be found in violation on the basis of its actions, its words, as well as its costumes and stage properties (Cohen and Cohen 1993, p. 243).

The composite text

The improvisational theater offered an extra measure of protection from inquisitive censors. Its character and costumes were quickly becoming
conventional, and therefore held no surprise, and its words and actions were improvised. The improvisation, however, was not always complete. There were in fact three general categories of improvised performance texts. The scenarios of the first category were invented expressly for improvisation without using previously scripted plots, those of the second were extracted from play texts in the canon of literary drama, and those in the third were partly scripted.

In the first category, the company’s scenario and repertoire of lazzi preexist the performance, and neither can be regarded as a script, not even in a minimalist conception of the dramatic text. As in all other forms of drama, in commedia dell’arte performance presupposes an originary phase, of which the plot outline and the lazzi routines are traces. Such traces, however, can be regarded as no more than “the crystallization of a concept and a plan” (Rozik 2010, p. 99). To be more precise, the concept is fully crystallized in the scenario, the matrix for the actors’ performance, understood as an embodiment of the dramatic action of the play, while the plan is contained in the concertatore’s blueprint for a production informed by a principle of unity. We might add, as a third originary source, the zibaldoni, in which the actors notated their favorite lazzi and examples of modular pieces that transcend the specificity of individual plots. But none of these sources constitutes a play text in itself, nor do they do so if they are taken all together. In this large category of works, which is by far the most inclusive one in the commedia dell’arte tradition, there is no script text of any kind. The only text involved is the one improvised during the performance.

In the second category, we find plots drawn from contemporary or classical play texts and reduced to a scenario for improvisation. Perrucci explains that there is a twofold advantage in this practice, for it enables the company to avoid long rehearsals, without which they could not perform a scripted play, and to vary the play at will, turning the same original text into the source of many different performance texts (Perrucci 2008, p. 186). The implications for their improvisation process are that, having read the dialogues between the characters in the scripted text, the actors are not required to start from scratch in their creation of text. The words will be their own, and they may have even rearranged the parts to suit the actors in the company, but the content of the scenes has already been articulated and made available to them in a clear and useful form. This way they essentially perform by improvisation a play that could simply be performed by recitation. In their variation of the text, they would undoubtedly add suitable lazzi from their repertoires, though these could be carefully chosen and deployed not to undermine the unity and coherence of the play.

The scenarios of the third category consist of outlines that include both scripted and unscripted scenario scenes. Adolfo Bartoli uses a metaphor
from carpentry to indicate the hybrid nature of textuality that is at the core of these works. Each unscripted scene, he says, is *incastrata* into a scripted text, which is united with it in a way analogous to a mortise and tenon joint (*incastrare*). The resulting textual structure is stable and is characterized by a clear sense of unity. As used by Bartoli, the carpentry metaphor presupposes that the scripted part of the play is much longer than the unscripted and is therefore the part that guarantees the stability of the hybrid text. The scenario scenes, or the sections to be improvised, are the tenon scenes, which during the performance will be inserted by the actors into the mortises left empty by the author of the scripted text. The example that Bartoli gives to illustrate this dramaturgy of hybrid textuality, *Rivalità senza premio nelle nozze di Eudosia e Genserico re dei Vandali* (Venezia 1709), is, in fact, largely a written play with a few scenes to be improvised. After the names of the two comic characters of the play, Pantalone and Zane, in the list of characters, the playwright adds the note “Parti buffe a piacimento sulla materia” (Bartoli 1890, p. lxv). In other words, the comic parts are to be improvised at will as long as the actors do not stray from the topic of discussion. The actors, in other words, are totally free to improvise dialogue and gestures in accordance with their talent and preference. No compositional restrictions are imposed on them other than that they should stay within the bounds of thematic relevance (*sulla materia*). The playwright clearly regarded the comic parts as minor interludes whose composition by improvising actors did not pose a risk to the play before the board of censors. The material of the scenario-like scenes was brief, a fact that playwrights could indicate graphically. In scene I.14 of *Rivalità senza premio*, for example, the author represents as lines of dots the missing words of the scenes to be improvised, offering a visual clue to their intended duration. This may be taken as a graphic indication of the fact that it is the written part of the play that incorporates unscripted scenes into its performance text and not the other way round.

There is no reason, however, why one could not begin with the dramaturgy of an unscripted play, laid down as a scenario and conceived as stable enough to accept written scenes without difficulty. The performance text of the play would then consist mostly of improvisation with brief scenes of performed recitation. A good example of this category of hybridity is Goldoni’s original scenario for *Servant of Two Masters* (1745). In his epistle to the reader of the fully scripted edition (1753), Goldoni recalls that, except for a few scenes for the lovers’ dialogues, he composed the play as a scenario to be performed by improvisation. Within the theme and plot development of the scenario, the actors had complete freedom to provide the missing text in performance, improvising words, *lazzi* and wit. The dramaturgy of the *Servant of Two Masters* in 1745 is based on an authorial position of humility before the skill of the great Antonio Sacchi, to whom is entrusted the responsibility of creating
by improvisation the vast majority of the performance text and incorporating into it a few scenes written out by the author.

In the eighteenth century, hybrid textuality oscillates between these two extremes. Goldoni and Gozzi wrote several plays compounded of scenario and script of varying ratio. From a pragmatic point of view, the first model is a gesture of openness by the playwright-centered theater toward performer improvisation, though in a tightly controlled manner that kept improvised text outside the logic of the play. Nothing in the scripted scenes that followed the comic episodes was conceived to depend on the text improvised by the performers, which, conceivably, could be left out without damage to the plot. The improvisers had no indispensable contribution to make to either the message or the artistic merits of the play. The solid body of the play, as a coherent organization of signs of artistic caliber, was the stage materialization of the script, into which the less stable and less predictable scenes of the improvisers could be mechanically inserted. The second model, on the other hand, rests on the premise that the cogent and well-founded part of the play, in aesthetic as well as in neutrally semiotic terms, was to be improvised by the actors directly on stage on the basis of a simple scenario. Despite its unpredictability, the text to be improvised represented, albeit virtually as an imaginative projection, the stable body of the play, into which the scenes scripted by the author were incorporated.

The third category of text is a perfect arena for reformers and counter-reformers of the theater and of its function in contemporary culture. The variable number and distribution of scripted scenes enabled the playwright and the company to collaborate effectively in advancing contrary agendas. Both Goldoni and Gozzi made use of this type of textuality to great effect: the former, to suppress the commedia dell’arte, which, in his view had nothing to contribute to contemporary culture; the latter, to reinvigorate it, on the principle that it had a highly significant role to play in the development of modern culture and in the tutelage of values.

The double voice of *Turandot*

Gozzi wrote several plays in this category of commedia dell’arte textuality, but the most famous of them is *Turandot* (1762), a play whose good fortune in theater history is enhanced by later translations and adaptations, including the well-known version by Schiller and the opera by Puccini. When we pick up a copy of Gozzi’s play and read in the list of characters—Pantalone is now the Secretary of State of the Chinese Empire, Tartaglia is its High Chancellor, Brighella is the imperial Master of the Pages, and Truffaldino is the Head Eunuch of the Royal Seraglio—we have no doubt that the stock characters
of the commedia dell’arte have come a long way. Swept away by eighteenth-century orientalism, they have immigrated to China, and they have done well for themselves. Their relocation in the East brought within their reach economic and political opportunities that could never become available to the likes of them in their own country. As we read on, we soon find that the familiar stock characters have acquired the manners of their new homeland—accepted its fashion, assimilated its customs, trained themselves in its special protocols, without losing any essential aspect of their former selves, such as their identifying costumes, their native language, and their inclination to coarseness. They have become sufficiently refined to rise to the highest offices possible for anyone other than the emperor himself. The journey begun two centuries earlier, when the Zanni from Bergamo first immigrated to Venice in pursuit of opportunity, seems finally to have found a utopian end in the sardonic imagination of their author.

Gozzi was a fierce ideologue of the counter-enlightenment and a devoted supporter of the commedia dell’arte tradition, obliged, as the saying goes, by his nobility—and it was a rather low-ranking nobility—to become the generous patron of a company of actors especially committed to its survival in the professional theater. He is not shy about being polemical:

Those clever, witty, and intelligent actors, capable of satisfying even the taste of our recently awakened talents, impersonate the ancient masked characters of our improvised comedy with the aid of their own ability to mimic and their characters’ humorous costumes, which together constitute an instrument of laughter so powerful, precise, concrete, and efficacious, that its effect will never diminish on the people, who will always have the right to enjoy what they like best, to laugh at what tickles them, and to pay no heed to those concealed Catos who do not want them to take pleasure at what they like. (Gozzi 1994, p. 103)

The stock characters of the Turandot live in an exotic never-never land of comic orientalism. The actors who impersonate them are given most of the words they need to say, but they improvise nonetheless with their gestures. The theatrical signs that they create consist of mime actions and costumes, whose main pragmatic function is to provoke cheerfulness and laughter. Holding as they do such high offices in China, the characters wear costumes on top of the costumes that identify them, but in a way that makes both costumes visible. The play has a metatheatrical character, since the composite signs in which it is articulated on stage includes references to both orientalism and commedia dell’arte. Gozzi’s polemic is against efforts to establish a literary theater by displacing the improvisational one from the stage on grounds of morality—hence the allusion to the austere Cato
the Censor (234–149 BC)—since the improvisational theater was frequently accused of indecency by Gozzi’s contemporaries.

There was of course no indecency in the scripted scenes of _Turandot_, though the commedia dell’arte characters were not known to have a refined spirit. Life could hardly have been better for them in China—were it not, as Chancellor Tartaglia intimates in a momentary lapse into his pre-immigration coarseness, “for that little pig” (_per quella porchetta_) of Turandot, who had to spoil everything by confusing men with her riddles and then chopping off their heads as if they were pumpkins. It would be better to take her to the temple and offer her in sacrifice to the gods, instead of sacrificing hundreds of animals on her account. She is a real bitch (_cagna_ in coming up with riddles that no one can figure out, observes in the same tone the Secretary of State, Pantalone. As the minister closest to the Emperor, Pantalone is the one who should advise him on the course of action that he should take, but in this case he is at a total loss. He points out to the emperor that in his native Venice there are no girls who hate men, nor, for that matter, men who would rush to get their heads chopped off for a pretty face. Master of the Pages Brighella, entrusted as he is with the education of the young men at court, is profoundly concerned not only by Turandot’s incomprehensible cruelty toward her suitors, but also by her general rejection of the institution of marriage, without which, it seems to him, legitimate procreation is not possible. Consequently, he and his fellow ministers, as he says in Venetian at one point, find themselves in a messy situation (_semo a una cattiva condizion_), when all they wanted from these jobs was to be able to save a little money for their old age. Only Truffaldino is cheerful, for he, having sacrificed his virility in order to become head eunuch in Turandot’s seraglio, sees no advantages whatsoever in the institution of marriage, which is furthermore based on the lie that it is necessary for procreation. His mother, he points out, was never married, and yet he had no trouble coming into the world. Besides, he knows opportunity well enough when he sees it: he serves the princess with devotion because every time she manages to chop off another man’s head, she is very generous to her number one eunuch.

The commedia characters who provide the laughter-inducing filters of the play are not the ones usually found together in the tradition prior to Gozzi. Opposite Pantalone, we would normally expect to see the Dottore rather than Tartaglia, the canonical combination of masked characters in the contemporary repertoire being, on the one hand, the two servants Brighella and Arlecchino, or, as in our case, Truffaldino, who is a simple variant of Arlecchino, and, on the other hand, the two old men Pantalone and Dottore. Playwrights of the time very rarely call for Tartaglia, and, as a rule, do not do so as a replacement for the Dottore. Immigration brings together all kinds of strangers, one would be tempted to say in coming up with a thematic reason
for the replacement, were it not for the fact that Gozzi’s exceptional stance has a very simple explanation: the company of Antonio Sacchi, whose alliance Gozzi had secured in his program for the revival of the commedia dell’arte, did not include an actor trained in the role of the Dottore—Roderigo Lombardi, the company’s last Dottore, had died in 1749 and had never been replaced—while it did include an excellent Tartaglia in the person of the accomplished actor Agostino Fiorilli. There is, of course some similarity of function between Tartaglia and the Dottore, in that Tartaglia is also a pompous know-it-all, but he stutters and is from Naples rather than Bologna, and he has a totally different costume and mask. For these reasons, the presence of Tartaglia and the absence of the Dottore made Sacchi’s company unique among the 160 or so that were active in northern Italy in the second half of the eighteenth century. Having elected to work with Sacchi, Gozzi had no choice but to pair Pantalone with Tartaglia rather than the Dottore.

The fact that the composition of the company was the chief conditioning factor in script production lends itself to the important observation that casting precedes play writing, rather than the reverse, and it is in any case the responsibility of the playwright rather than that of the company manager. Professional playwrights of this period worked as scenario and script writers for particular companies and were therefore expected to write plays that could be successfully performed by their actors. Students of eighteenth-century commedia dell’arte are familiar with the compositional implications of this idea from Goldoni, who leaves no doubt that, even in plays written after his rejection of the commedia dell’arte, his own developmental procedure was to begin always with an analysis of the “nature” of the actors—that is to say, with the physique, emotional disposition, and skills of each member of the company, including their linguistic abilities—and then to invent characters that presupposed those very qualities and that required those precise skills in the actors for their realization on stage. Only then could Goldoni devise actions of which such characters might be the likely agents. Therefore, it would be definitely more correct to say that for him and for the professional playwrights of his generation, the actors are part of the prime matter from which the playwright fashions his characters rather than instruments for the realization of characters autonomously created from nothing in his imagination. Even at the level of pure script, before any staging process actually begins, the writer and the actor are engaged in a form of authorial collaboration. The nature of that collaboration is logically implied by the idea of theater-making that informs the contemporary professional stage and, what is more, is legally called for by the contract that binds them.

In Gozzi’s Turandot, this type of collaboration is especially evident, since, despite what one might infer from some popular translations and adaptations of Turandot (Schiller’s included), Gozzi actually left a considerable part of the
play to be improvised on stage by the actors performing it. There are two kinds of scenes to be improvised in *Turandot*. In the first type, no actual speeches are given, though the basic content of the episode is provided in a point-form narrative with a call for appropriate stage business. This is the case of Truffaldino's *lazzi*-studded monologue (scene IV.8), in which, on behalf of Turandot—who, having been riddled out by the mysterious prince, stoops to cheating—he attempts to discover Calaf's identity, that is, to solve his riddle, by interpreting the movements that he makes in his sleep. It is also the case of the lively altercation between Truffaldino and Brighella (scene II.1), the one, as is to be expected of the head eunuch, defending Turandot's right not to marry and to prefer the company of women and eunuchs to that of sex-driven men, and the other, as might be equally predictable of the High Chancellor, defending the right of the state to demand that she marry someone, since the very survival of the state as a patriarchy depends on Turandot's acceptance of a husband, who will one day inherit the throne. The second type of improvisational scene includes an episode in which Truffaldino's speeches are summarized in scenario form, the exact words being left for the actor to produce by improvisation, while those of his several dialogue partners are given in full.

As the narrative nucleus of the play, the story of Turandot comes to Gozzi ready-made from several traditions. It is, quite naturally, consigned to the fully scripted scenes. Being a vehicle for very precise messages—which range from the suppression of lesbianism and the intellectual status women to the imposition of marriage for the protection of the patriarchal order of society—the dramatic action of the taming of Turandot could not be exposed to the risks of linguistic improvisation. As a channel for ideological discourse, script comes with guarantees that improvisation cannot offer. But the comic view that one can have of the story through commedia dell'arte clowning—action that is meant to reinforce the ideology expressed in the serious part of the script by exacerbating the effects of Turandot's hostility to marriage—is entrusted to the skill and experience of the actors impersonating the stock characters. In the performance text, the actors speak authorially in their own voices in the scenario scenes and vetriloquize Gozzi's in the scripted ones.

This heterogeneous model of play script leads us to an important observation. The usual concept of text, linked as it is to works that are endowed with a sense of linguistic closure, is a theoretical category that is not fully applicable to Gozzi's play because the play, even when it is regarded as verbal stuff, is deliberately constructed as an incomplete entity. In the case of commedia dell'arte plays based on scenarios, plays that are by definition composed by improvisation, the word "text" can refer only to text-as-performance, the scenario being little more than a story line and an elaborate set of stage directions. In the case of fully scripted plays, text refers
to the verbal substance that, though meant to be acted out on stage, has an autonomous existence as a complete linguistic, perhaps even literary, object. Gozzi’s model makes use of both ideas, but it cannot be reduced to either of them. His dramatization of the story of Turandot has a built-in fluidity that partakes of both the notion of text as scenario and that of text as a script to be performed, as upheld by Goldoni in opposition to the performer-based compositional practices of commedia dell’arte companies. Although it is much more complete than a scenario, it is also much less complete than a literary text. It therefore cannot be assigned to either category. It will become a complete text only when the actor’s improvised parts are added to the playwright’s scripted ones in performance.

Before performance, Gozzi’s play can be described only as a text in a state of becoming, enjoying a form of public existence, that is to say, existence in print as an incomplete dialogical object, which is denied to pure commedia dell’arte and is logically unavailable to scripted comedy. Conceptually, it comes into being when the closure of script is broken by the intrusion of improvisation. This is an obvious theoretical fact, but it is something that needs to be stated with a certain degree of emphasis, because too many scholars and translators, accustomed to working in national traditions that have not been significantly shaped by ex tempore compositional practices, force Gozzi’s play into the category of the scripted text. They do so by concealing from view that part of it which, even at the level of verbal material, cannot come to the work from anywhere other than the performer, who must therefore be related to the playwright by aesthetic solidarity and ideological complicity.

The pragmatics of scripted and improvised translation

In drama, as in other artistic genres, there are many bad translations, and there is always an acute need for new ones. This is a statement that, within the margin of error normally allowed to generalizations, requires no proof, so abundant and well known is the evidence on which it is based. What is needed is a serious consideration of the reasons why this is so. The Italian adage traduttore traditore—that is, the translator is a traitor—is a claim that translations are of necessity fraudulent. It would be grossly unfair, however, and not altogether logical, to extend the same judgment to all translations. Philological loyalty to a verbal document and idiomatic coherence with the new language, which together are the translator’s greatest claim to glory in the translation of certain types of texts, are insufficient in the translation of
drama if they do not include knowledge of the different theater cultures. Such knowledge is as indispensable as linguistic competence in the translation of dramatic works. Hence, the predictable consequence that translations acceptable to linguists and literary scholars, more frequently than not, turn out to be inadequate for the stage and to require a considerable degree of dramaturgical doctoring before rehearsals can actually begin.

Theatrical conventions are the instruments of theater-making, the modes and tools of expression available to performance in a given culture, and, unless they are incorporated in the purview of the translator, the importation of a play from one universe of discourse into another will owe any stage success that it may enjoy more to chance than to art and method. In the case of commedia dell’arte, the problems are compounded exponentially. Since the text of a commedia dell’arte play exists only as performance, how does one translate it into another language for another theater culture? The performance text is ephemeral, employs visual as well as verbal codes, and is not subject to analytical and transformative procedures designed for exclusively linguistic texts that have been crystallized in scripted form. The scenario is the only exclusively verbal and nontransient aspect of a commedia dell’arte play, but it is not a play text, whose creation it precedes in both time and logic. The scenario is a compositional matrix used by properly trained actors to generate the play text by multicode improvised composition. Ideally, a translation would have to import the scenario as well as the actors’ compositional process, for only that way could a comparable performance text be generated on a stage of the receiving culture, a text that has no previous material existence in its language of origin.

In the context of the commedia dell’arte, we would do well to remind ourselves that, etymologically understood, translation has a literal meaning similar to that of the term “relocation.” The translation of a play text so that it may be brought to life from within the theater language of the new culture is in essence its relocation to a world distinct from the one of its origin. In the translation of scripted play texts, it is easy, although hardly justifiable, to take the complex process of translation suggested by the idea of its cultural and linguistic relocation and to rationalize it down to a linguistic transformation. The reduction of the relocation process to a linguistic transmutation presupposes abstracting away the social settings of both the source and the product and disregarding the difference in the material conditions of performance in both theater cultures. But in the translation of a commedia dell’arte play, in which speech has no existence prior to performance, the scenario being ultimately no more than a narrative of stage directions for compositional improvisation, the question is somewhat more difficult.

Relocating the improvisational process involves at least two steps, performed by different people. The first step is transposing in the target
language the rather simple prose of the scenario, something that can be done by anyone who has an adequate knowledge of both languages. The second step involves improvising in performance the multicode semiotic text called for by the scenario, and this can be done only by a performer during a performance, working in harmony with the rest of the company. The first step is easy, of course, since as a rule, commedia dell’arte scenarios do not have any literary pretensions and are in any case meant to be read only by the performers. Flaminio Scala’s collection, *Scenarios of the Commedia dell’Arte* (*Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, 1611), which was designed for a reading public as well as theater professionals, is an exception to the rule. The second step, on the other hand, is much more demanding and depends for its success, not only on the skill of the performer, but also on the existence of an appropriate theatrical tradition in which the performance codes can operate compositionally. In cultures where there is no tradition of impromptu acting, or in which actor training programs do not include improvisation as a compositional technique, rather than, say, as a rehearsal exercise, the text that is finally improvised may turn out to be artistically inappropriate and laden with associations alien to the commedia dell’arte genre.

It would be useful to look at the question of the cultural relocation of commedia dell’arte from the perspective of the different types of theatrical cultures available to receive it, each considered in terms of the difference that separates it from the Italian impromptu tradition and each appraised as a function of the conditioning effect that such difference is likely to exercise on the shape of the final product. Such a question would involve considering the need to determine appropriate theoretical categories through which to carry out a dramaturgical analysis of the commedia-like potential of various theater cultures. All forms of cultural relocation, including ones that do not involve artistic processes, are semantically determined, to varying degrees, by the audience’s paradigms of perception and the creative traditions that define the theater culture of adoption. One famous example from the world of dramatic theory can illustrate the issue. When Averroes translated into Arabic the *Poetics* of Aristotle, he was at a loss before the Greek concepts of tragedy and comedy, since in the culture of the Arabs there was no comparable dramatic tradition and he had no knowledge of the tragedies cited by Aristotle (Weinberg 1961, vol. 1 pp. 352–361). He therefore interpreted these terms, and so rendered them into Arabic, by way of the two major distinctions found in his literary culture, namely eulogy and satire, thereby disfiguring the meaning of the original beyond comprehension and conditioning the perception that subsequent readers were to have of Aristotle for some time.

In the commedia dell’arte tradition, there are at least three types of texts to be translated: scenarios without any dialogue whatsoever in them, scripted
plays with entire commedia scenes left to the improvisational skill of the performers, and scripted plays with scenes in which all the speeches of one of the dialogue partners are given in full but the responses by his interlocutor are left to improvisation. In the first case there is no text other than the performance text created by improvisation in the act of performance, in the second case there is a script a few scenes shy of a full text, and in the third case there is a virtually complete script lacking only a character’s speeches in a few otherwise finished dialogues. Carlo Gozzi’s well-known Love of Three Oranges (Amore delle tre melarance, 1762) is an example of the first type, in which the verbal text is entirely produced by means of improvisation in performance, while Turandot, as we have seen, includes examples of the other two types, in which improvisation is called for in varying degrees and under different textual conditions.

For modern students of drama, the term improvisation typically denotes a phenomenon that is radically different from the one known by the same name in the commedia dell’arte tradition and, consequently, does not concern translators. Following Stanislavsky’s lead, North American versions of method acting tend to regard improvisation chiefly as a rehearsal technique designed to enable actors to achieve naturalness of expression and to avoid giving the impression of speaking memorized lines between cues. There are various ways in which this can be done. A common one involves acting out the dialogue in an imaginary set different from the one called for by the stage directions—that is, by improvising the spatial context of the dialogue. In another, the performers act the dialogue from the perspective of a psychological base analogous to but distinct from the one given in the text—that is, by improvising the emotional motivation of the scripted words and inventing lines that temporarily replace the words that will be spoken in performance—that is, by improvising provisional and preparatory verbal text. All of these methods bring the actors into more intimate contact with their characters and thus enable them to avoid the pitfalls of excessive conventionality (Easty 1981, pp. 110–115). Translators who approach a commedia dell’arte scenario with this concept of improvisation can see no relevance of the process to the act of translation. Commedia dell’arte improvisation is quite different. In the first place, it is a performance technique rather than the exploratory device that it has come to be for the post-Stanislavsky theater. In the second place, it is a compositional practice operating within the constraints of a given plot outline and an actor’s real repertory of signs, verbal as well as physical, that are susceptible of combination with expressions in the vocabulary of his stage partners.

Unless they are specialized in the commedia dell’arte style, contemporary North American training programs do not normally include exercises in this type of improvisation. The consequence is that improvised composition in
commedia dell’arte texts cannot be achieved without some difficulty and, in any case, is well beyond the reach of most nonspecialized actors. Translators who are aware of this fact are faced with a dilemma. They can translate the scenario of the play, scene, or part, as the case may be, in narrative form, with the degree of philological loyalty to the original that is normally assumed in literary translations, though they run the risk of subjecting the scenario to an inadequate improvisational technique at performance time, with the result of producing an inappropriate performance text. Or else they can expand the scenario into a dialogical text in accordance with the tradition to which it belongs, on the assumption that, given the inadequacy of the conditions of performance of the receiving culture, the actors would not otherwise be able to do justice to it on stage. In this case, they sacrifice the chief distinguishing feature of the commedia genre, which is textual improvisation.

Henry Salerno, in his popular translation of Flaminio Scala’s *Teatro delle favole rappresentative* has opted for the first solution, as have several others in their renditions of less famous seventeenth-century play scenarios. On the other hand, Louis DiGaetani has expanded the few pages of Gozzi’s *Love of Three Oranges* into a full dialogical script, complete with a prologue and classical divisions into acts and scenes in the French style, confident that Gozzi would not have disapproved of his play text, which is judged to be more appropriate “for contemporary actors and directors” (DiGaetani 1988, p. 14). DiGaetani has no difficulty calling this a *translation* rather than, say, an *adaptation*, since, conscious as he is of the general inadequacy of the material conditions of performance in the receiving theater culture, he is convinced that this sort of compromise represents a greater guarantee of loyalty to the original than a straight translation in scenario form. The same, of course, is true of Prokofiev, who, in expanding the scenario into an opera libretto—that is to say, in relocating a work of spoken commedia dell’arte to a different genre—could hardly leave the composition of the text up to the performers. It should be clear now why in the case of commedia dell’arte the word translation should be recharged with the multidimensional material meaning suggested by the idea of material relocation.

The same two solutions can be found in the translation of works such as *Turandot*, whose hybrid quality makes them infinitely more interesting. Faced with the prospect of relocating a commedia work to the theater culture of eighteenth-century Germany, which had no comparable tradition of impromptu acting and which did not include training programs for the use of improvisation as a text-creating technique within the boundaries of a given plot, Schiller had no difficulty in deciding to transform the scenario portions of *Turandot* into scripted dialogue (White 1969, pp. 123–140). Given the traditions and conditions of performance in the translator’s culture, in the skeletal narrative form of the original, the translation would have been quite useless, and
perhaps even meaningless, to German actors and audiences. Against Schiller and others who have followed his example, Jonathan Levy retained, with the approbation of so influential a figure as Eric Bentley, the impromptu scenes in his own translation of *Turandot*, so as to give the flavor of the scenario form (Gozzi 1964). But he took the liberty of considerably modifying their physical content, supposedly to make it easier for American and English actors to improvise the dialogue.

In more recent times, Albert Bermel and Ted Emery have decided to follow suit, probably on the dramaturgical consideration that the largely Stanyslavskian training of American actors is quite alien to the spirit of commedia dell’arte improvisation. Explicitly, though, it was for fear that incompetent directors might feel free to insert material damaging to the play that the translators scripted out impromptu scenes. As Bermel explains in the “Afterword” to *Five Tales for the Theatre* (1989), “we have shifted them from suggestive prose instructions to explicit dialogue, in part as a weak protective measure against directors who may want to season the plays with items from yesterday’s newspaper or this morning’s talk show” (Bermel 1989, p. 312).

The extent to which dramaturgical consideration can induce the translators to assume a range of responsibilities well beyond those entailed by the literary meaning of translation can be appreciated from an examination of two scenes of the Bermel and Emory version of *Turandot*. In the original text, scene II.1 is given as a set of stage directions with narrative details for the improvisation of a quick-paced dialogue by the actors playing Truffaldino and Brighella in the presence of a group of eunuchs sweeping the room under Truffaldino’s supervision. Gozzi provides the actors with a few guidelines: Truffaldino cheerfully orders the eunuchs to set up the room for a solemn meeting in which another unfortunate suitor will be sentenced to death by decapitation, says that he is likely to receive a generous tip from Turandot, and argues with Brighella about the institution of marriage. Brighella is not happy that one of his compatriots shows such little respect for human life, thinking of the execution of an innocent man only as an occasion to get a tip, and upholds the virtues of marriage. In their translation, Bermel and Emery offer a dialogue of approximately the same length as the narrative original, changing a couple of minor details: the time since the last beheading was changed from three hours to one hour, and the eunuchs begin to arrange the set on their own rather than by following the directions of Truffaldino. The narrative leaves room for prolongation and for a variety of quick actions, especially by Truffaldino, which the translators acknowledge when they allow for “improvised lazzi as desired” (Gozzi 1989, p. 138).

It is significant, however, that in the translation, Brighella does not refer to Truffaldino as one his compatriots (*compatriota*), as indicated by Gozzi. By being required to use this appellation in the text to be improvised, Brighella
was to reproach Truffaldino for having forgotten the saner values by which both he and Truffaldino were brought up in their homeland. Unlike Brighella, Truffaldino has yielded to the power of his new culture and allowed it to assimilate him completely. This passage has implications for the acting styles to be adopted by the actors impersonating the two characters. The actor playing Brighella must produce physical and vocal gestures that indicate his roots in his place of origin as well as the characteristics that he has acquired through immigration, almost as if he were to speak Chinese perfectly but with the accent of his place of origin. The actor playing Truffaldino, on the other hand, must show that his character has severed all ties with his culture of origin. The semiotic difference in their mode of improvisation is subtle but distinct. Brighella's double level of signification is related to the double identity visible in his costume (a minister of China and immigrant from the Republic of Venice), whereas Truffaldino's culture of origin does not interfere with his conduct as Turandot's head eunuch.

Equally significant is their rendition of the long *lazzo* for Truffaldino in scene IV.8, described by Gozzi in considerable detail. Truffaldino places a piece of mandrake root under Calaf's pillow as he sleeps, and then attempts to interpret the way that Calaf moves his arms and legs in his sleep. The duration of the *lazzo* can be controlled by the improvising actor, especially in the initial stages, when Truffaldino describes the power of the mandrake to make people speak in their sleep and reveal their secrets. Calaf does not speak, however, and so the focal point of the *lazzo* consists in Truffaldino's reading and possible mimicry of Calaf's actions, treating them as gestural equivalents of letters of the alphabet, which spell a name. Gozzi does not specify the name, saying only that it is “un nome strano e ridicolo a suo senno,” which is to say, a name of his choice both strange and ridiculous. Bermel and Emery translated the scene as a scripted monologue of fixed length in the course of which Truffaldino recites brief narratives, invented by them as functions of the presumed power of the mandrake. When Truffaldino interprets Calaf's movements as letters of the alphabet, he pronounces them one by one, spelling out his own name, at which point he jokes about this being the only name that he knows how to spell.

The liberty that the translators take in giving us this detail is noteworthy. Their dramaturgical interest in focusing the attention of the audience onto Truffaldino's silliness contrasts sharply with the author's explicit instructions for the gestural improvisation of the scene. Gozzi's Truffaldino calls attention to himself by his physical and gestural antics, signifying his attempt at interpretation of Calaf's visual signs, and by the imagination with which he comes up with a name at once strange and ridiculous, that is to say, eliciting various interpretative efforts from Truffaldino and provoking the audience to laughter. The creative freedom that the original scene offers the actor
impersonating Truffaldino is decidedly excluded by the translation. In scene II.1, Bermel and Emery allow the actor the freedom to improvise *lazzi* at pleasure, since, in their scripting, the scene calls for minor little actions in support of the dialogue, which encodes as speech what is merely suggested by the stage directions. *Lazzi* in that scene do not require a highly sophisticated ability on the part of the actor. But in the monologue *lazzo* of IV.8, Truffaldino’s skill as a clownish semiotician is not a supporting action but the theme of the scene, and it is long and complex enough to call for virtuoso style improvisation, none of which can be fixed in a script without deciding on the name spelled out by Calaf with his body as he turns in his sleep.

Gozzi does not say what language the actor impersonating Truffaldino should speak in the play, though it is more than likely that he spoke a version of Venetian with a substratum of Bergamese as he did in *The Servant of Two Master*, which was improvised by the same actor, Antonio Sacchi. Like most other contemporary plays performed by improvisation or partial improvisation, *Turandot* is characterized by a low degree of linguistic heterogeneity. But in the commedia dell’arte tradition, particularly in the seventeenth century, the degree of heterogeneity could be exceedingly high, even in plays scripted in full—one need only quote Vergilio Verrucci’s play *Li diversi linguaggi* (Venice 1627), in which commedia dell’arte stock characters theatricalize the linguistic heterogeneity of Italy. In the case of scenarios for improvisation, the actors were trained to use languages as the identifying features of stock characters, who were themselves stylized representations of more or less large sections of the population, which they both represented and satirized. As Erith Jaffe-Berg observes in an important study of the subject, “in so far as commedia dell’arte was a theater of dialects, it was also engaged in comic and derisive representation of dialects and idiolects” (Jaffe-Berg 2009, p. 80).

In translations for the stage, the linguistic heterogeneity of the commedia dell’arte must be a concern only for those translators who opt for the dialogical expansion of scenarios. Those who restrict themselves to the scenario itself, pass the problem on to the director. In commedia dell’arte the original conditions of performance included the principle that, while the serious characters always spoke in Italian or literary Tuscan, the regional provenance of the masked stock character would also furnish the actors with the dialects in which to improvise their characters’ speeches: Arlecchino spoke in Bergamese in the seventeenth century and in imperfect Venetian in much of the eighteenth, the Dottore used Bolognese with a generous sprinkling of Latin expressions, while Pantalone spoke only Venetian. Regional language was as much a part of the character as his mask and costume. Now the sense of this multilingual reality is extremely difficult to render in translation, since English is not related to regional speech in the way Italian is. The dialects of
Italy, or the vernaculars of its different regions, are not dialects of Italian, that is to say, regional varieties of Italian or Tuscan, but dialects quite distinct from Italian, several of them being separated from it and from each other by a considerable margin of reciprocally unintelligible speech. Commedia dell’arte performance texts must therefore rely more than other theatrical genres on the eloquence of phonic gestures and physical signs.

Just how daunting is the dramaturgical task of translating commedia can be seen with ease from the way Leon Kats rendered, for the first volume of Eric Bentley’s *The Classic Theatre* (1958), the anonymous seventeenth-century scenario known in English as *The Three Cuckolds*. Kats converts the scenario into a full script, in two acts with 22 scenes each in the classical scripted style, with detailed stage directions for the required physical action, as derived from more or less typical lazzis. In the blurb on the back cover, this script is called, obviously with Bentley’s assent, “a conjectural reconstruction of the complete dialogue.” Precisely how the conjecture was reached is by no means obvious. Presumably the translator imagined an ideal, or perhaps a typical, performance by contemporary actors and then transcribed the visualized performance text.

This model of composition is based on the example of Goldoni, who, as we have seen, composed *The Servant of Two Masters* as a scenario and then expanded it as a script, having seen the excellent way in which the celebrated company of Antonio Sacchi improvised the text in performance. Goldoni’s final script attempts to reproduce, as precisely as is humanly possible, Sacchi’s improvisation in order to offer other actors, who were not as skilled in the commedia dell’arte style, a model of excellence. Leon Katz was faced with a similar problem, and, since he was not witness to such an improvised performance, was forced to conjecture one, and then proceed to record the script improvised by his imaginary actors, in a manner, as he says, that “expands the comedy’s situations in the spirit of the originals” and in coherence with tradition (Katz 1958, p. 377).

In order to justify this dramaturgical operation from within the commedia dell’arte culture, Katz made every effort to diminish the status of improvisation as the chief defining feature of the genre, stating that it did not really constitute “the genius of the performance” (Katz 1958, p. 372). Certainly by 1753, when he composed the full text of *The Servant of two Masters*, Goldoni had lost confidence in the commedia dell’arte’s ability to survive much longer on the basis of improvisation. He made this clear in *The Comic Theatre* (1750), in which he proposed reducing to zero the actor’s freedom to improvise. But in presenting the text of *The Servant of Two Masters* to his readers, Goldoni stated with great clarity that actors as talented as Sacchi were not required to follow the script, which they could use only as a suggestion for appropriate improvisation. The irony, however, is that at that time Goldoni was actually working to destroy the genre and to replace it with his scripted commedie
di carattere. Katz must have been aware of the irony of his own situation and
must not have been fully convinced that his script was sufficient to render
the spirit of the performance text that was probably produced on the basis
of the original scenario, since in the appendix to the volume, he yields to his
sense of history and also publishes an English version of the simple three-
page scenario (Katz 1958, pp. 374–377).

The same dramaturgical difficulty can be seen in a number of other (less
familiar) cases. Further examples would give my argument the gravitas of
statistical weight but would contribute nothing to its logic and hence to its
cogency. The point is that there is no easy solution, and that the transposition
of a commedia dell’arte work to a theater culture that has no stage knowledge
of it forces translators to assume a responsibility that is not normally required
by other genres. They either limit themselves to the scenario form, confident
that the conventions of theater-making and the paradigms of perception of the
receiving theater culture are sufficiently sensitive to the commedia dell’arte
not to transform the work into something radically different, or intervene
by conjecturing a text that might be produced by ideal commedia dell’arte
actors in performance, and then translate that text, on the judgment that the
theatrical rhetoric to which the translated text is consigned would otherwise
disfigure the original. One can be faithful to and translate either the scenario or
a fictional performance text, but not both. The decision is neither linguistic nor
literary but dramaturgical. It is of necessity based on the translator’s appraisal
of the degree of openness to commedia dell’arte that characterizes the living
theatrical conventions of the receiving culture, and that is a responsibility that
only dramaturgically trained translators can assume.


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